

Dirges in The Dark

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Dirges in The Dark

by [WixWrites](#)

Summary

When Jimmy woke up to the sound of gunfire across the plains, he was convinced that Grian's past had finally caught up to them. He never could have imagined that the day would end with the eyes of the town looking to him for guidance, including that of the town's newest resident, a red-eyed horse-thief with a secret that had sent the previous sheriff on a wild goose chase halfway across the continent.

Notes

Here we go! This is my piece for the Hermitshipping Big Bang 2023 event! I was lucky enough to be able to work with some amazing artists, who will be posting their art for some of the later chapters.

Big shout out to the mods of this event for wrangling everyone, and to my artists [Hybbart](#) and [Foxyola](#)!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Gunpowder Stars

The sun blazed overhead, heat scorching down onto the packed, rough earth. The heat beat against the wood of the little homestead, and the horses outside seemed too tired to even swat at the flies that tried to bite them. Even inside, Jimmy could practically smell it, burning down onto the ground and rising again, mixed with the ever-present dust in the air.

When Grian swanned downstairs and put the blueprints on the table, Jimmy knew the rest of the morning was done for. He set aside the boot he'd been clumsily trying to repair and walked over to the table, ignoring both the uneven set of his steps and the way Grian unrolled the paper like he'd already won the argument.

"This?" Jimmy waved a hand over the intensive schematics that Grian had drawn, "this is unnecessary. We already know what we're building."

Grian rolled his eyes and pulled the pencil out from behind his ear, carefully wiggling it out from behind his glasses so as not to dislodge them. Jimmy could see where the wire of the frames had been bent and wiggled back into place several times across the nose. To anyone else, the sight of them may have encouraged them to let their guard down around his brother. Jimmy was not one of them. "This is what a *plan* looks like, Tim. I know it's an unfamiliar concept to you, but having a plan like this is what will help us get the barn finished."

Jimmy rested his hands on the table, letting the feeling of the wood, worn smooth with use by hands and time and love that didn't belong to the little family now housed here, ground him. Now that he was close enough that Grian wasn't hidden by the shadows inside their home, Jimmy noticed the circles under his eyes and the additional pallor of his skin beneath the smattering of freckles across his nose. He narrowed his eyes.

"Did you spend all night working on this?"

"Maybe. Look here, since it's just the two of us, we don't have the benefit of manpower, so we have to make use of other methods to increase our efficiency."

"Three of us," Jimmy craned his neck, making sure that they were still alone. He kept his voice low when he continued. "You know Pearl will want to help." Grian made a face and hid it just as quickly. It was only by virtue of familiarity that Jimmy was able to read it in time. Guilt, frustration, hesitation. Unfortunately, Jimmy couldn't exactly *blame* him for any of those things, no matter how badly he wanted to. He watched as a muscle in his brother's cheek spasmed. Grian opened his mouth and shut it again. Last year, Grian would have been happy to let Pearl help them. Last year, they wouldn't have needed her to. Jimmy took pity on Grian and changed the subject. "And where are we putting it?" Jimmy eyed the blueprints, noting with displeasure where Grian had placed the barn in relation to the house.

His pity only extended so far.

Ten minutes later, Jimmy vaguely noted the rustle of Pearl's skirts as she came into the room, but he was in the middle of jabbing his finger at the paper between Grian and himself. Maybe

it was the heat getting to him, maybe it was the tone in Grian's voice, or *maybe* he was just right, and he knew it, and he wasn't willing to back down, this time.

"It looks better there!" Grian exclaimed, his voice going higher at the end, a sure sign that he was starting to lose his temper.

Behind him, he heard Pearl groan and the thump of her weight onto the window box as she sat down, resigned to having to hear this argument for the third time in as many days. He didn't know how she could stand it there, on hot days like this. The sun filtered in through the thick glass, and it *had* to be sweltering, but when Jimmy glanced back with an apologetic grimace, Pearl looked calm as could be. She'd turned her attention to his discarded boot and raised an eyebrow at him as the sole of the boot peeled away from the rest of it and fell into her free hand.

He hadn't gotten *particularly* far in fixing it. He turned his back on the amused gaze she cast his way, his ears burning. "I don't care if it *looks* better, who's going to see it?" The table wobbled beneath his hands, and he forced himself to stand straight. He scrubbed at his hair, cropped short again just last week and still new-again to him, trying to vent some of the frustration building in his chest. He clenched his teeth against irritated words and felt grit grinding between his molars. They needed to sweep again.

Part of him wished that Mrs. Ramos, the woman who had lived here originally, were still here, though he couldn't ever *actually* wish that on her. She had taken them in, when it became clear that they were going to keep clogging up the boarding house. She wasn't long for the town, she'd told them, and she'd like to pass her husband's legacy onto someone she thought might care for it properly. A few weeks ago, she'd gone back south to be with the rest of her remaining family, and three days later, they'd realized that the barn on the property needed to be replaced, before it fell on the horses they housed there.

Grian had thought it was a great opportunity to move the barn closer to the house. Jimmy didn't want to *move* it, so much as reposition it so it was in line with where they trained the horses. Jimmy wanted to live up to Mrs. Ramos's expectations. Maybe that was why he wasn't letting Grian put form over function, on this one.

Grian smacked the pencil back down onto the blueprints he'd spread across the table. When he looked at Jimmy, his eyes burned, cool and irritated and just as hungry for a fight as Jimmy seemed to be.

"*We* will!" he snapped, straightening his spine and locking his shoulders the way he did when he was going to stand by his argument, even if he *knew* Jimmy was right. "I'd rather not live next to an eyesore, if it's all the same to you." It didn't matter that, in stature, Jimmy had his brother beat. In sheer *personality*, Grian won every time.

Almost every time.

"It's not going to be an *eyesore* just because it's closer to where we train the horses, Grian."

"Tim—"

“No! You’re gonna agree with me six months down the line when you’re sick of dragging the beasts an extra hundred yards to get them to the corral, but it’ll be too late to move it, and you know it!”

“It’s pronounced—” Grian began, and Jimmy knew it was just to get a rise out of him, he *knew* Grian knew what he was doing, but that didn’t stop it from working.

“I don’t care how it’s pronounced!” Jimmy threw his hands up as frustration won out and his voice started to rise.

“You know where *I* think it should be?” Pearl cut in. She was still perched on the window box, but her feet were tucked under her, now, a testament to how long she’d been sitting there. She was fiddling with a string she’d used to tie the sole back onto Jimmy’s boot, as a temporary measure, so he wouldn’t have to try and ride in his old town shoes. He’d have to crawl under the bed to get to them, for starters, and then there was the matter of the fact that he hated them.

At the sound of Pearl’s voice, they both sagged a little, even if not all of the tension left their shoulders. Jimmy didn’t know if Grian relaxed because he realized it wasn’t *just* them in the room, or if his reasons were the same as Jimmy’s: because it was Pearl doing the talking.

“Where’s that, Pearlo?” Jimmy asked. She glared at his tone, far more even than it had been a minute ago and chucked the shoe at his chest. He caught it and—gingerly, unlike this morning—tugged it on. She stood, moving aside so she could gesture through the window, to where piles of lumber were clearly visible, already bleaching in the sun.

“Off the bloody lawn, that’s where,” she folded her arms, and in her stance, Jimmy saw no room for argument. “Now come on, I told Gem I’d meet her at noon, and you’ve already made me late. If we wait much longer, those piles of leather Jimmy calls boots are going to crumble into dust—”

“Hey!”

“—and then he’ll have to ride barefoot. *I* don’t much look forward to hearing him complain about every rock he steps on between Sausage’s and Shelby’s.”

Jimmy, because he was a mature adult and not a child any longer, stuck his tongue out at his sister when Grian wasn’t looking. She rolled her eyes and made a face back at him.

Given the circumstances, he probably *should* have gone to get his old town shoes, but they were not suitable for riding or, hell, for *walking* in this climate, and at the first opportunity, he’d shoved them under his bed and hadn’t looked back. He’d ordered a new pair from Shelby as soon as he’d realized these ones needed fixing.

Unfortunately for him, that was sooner than he would have liked, given he’d gotten them secondhand from Mrs. Ramos. They’d been her husband’s, before he’d succumbed to the smallpox that claimed half of Del Sombra’s population.

Some nights, Jimmy thought he could still hear her crying in the room down the hall from his own. Some nights, Jimmy thought he could hear the town *itself* crying, mourning for those that had been lost in the plague, and the mine collapse before it.

Del Sombra had never been a thriving town, by the sound of it. A small mining settlement that barely made ends meet most days. At best, it had been *stable*, capable of supporting its residents and no one else. Then, a rash of bad luck like nothing else had swept through—a tunnel in the mine had collapsed, destabilizing what little economic growth they had going for them and killing several townsfolk with it. As if that hadn't been bad enough, as soon as the mine superintendent, a man known only to Jimmy as "Chef," had shored up the tunnels again, the smallpox had hit.

From the stories Jimmy and Pearl had gathered, the pox had been brutal, taking out men, women, and children indiscriminately. The closest guess anyone could muster was that it had come in on a trader's wagon that had passed through. When they'd first gotten there, Jimmy had seen the graves next to the empty church beside the station, rows on rows of near-fresh graves lining the back. Pearl had told Jimmy, once, that Sausage swore up and down that the only reason he and Hermès were alive was because the Sheriff had nursed them back to health.

That had been *before* he was the Sheriff, though. When he'd just been passing through, same as whoever had likely brought the disease down on their heads.

It was odd to think of Scar as anything *other* than the Sheriff, when that was what Jimmy had known the man as the whole time they'd lived there. It was the Sheriff who'd greeted the three of them when they'd gotten in, travel-weary and wary of stopping, and had greeted them with a smile that was half teeth, half warning. They'd only learned later that he was still wet behind the ears, as Gem put it. The last sheriff had died of smallpox, his deputy a half-step behind, and when the town needed a new sheriff, it had only seemed right that the man who'd saved the town was the one to take up the role.

Even now, Del Sombra was still picking itself back up, but it was going in a better direction. A new tunnel had opened up in the mine, revealing a previously undiscovered vein of silver, rich for the taking, and Scar had managed to sweet-talk the Union Pacific company into making Del Sombra a stop on their line. That, more than anything else, had the town bustling. People from across the country had decided to make Del Sombra the place that they hung their hat. Even Jimmy, Pearl, and Grian had been tugged into the tide of travelers making their way into the town, in search of a new start, or a new home.

Mrs. Ramos had gone back to the rest of her family six months ago now, and the little corral had been home ever since—

"I can stay behind," Grian said, still hurtling down the path their argument had paved. "I can get—"

—Even if sometimes Jimmy wanted to storm out and never look back.

"Ohohoho *no*," Jimmy cut in, "no you don't."

“*Both* of you.” Pearl snapped, clearly over the argument and them with it. “I’d leave both of you here, but I need help. Cleo’s meant to have our order in today, and that means all hands.”

Jimmy slumped, letting the fight visibly drain out of him, for Pearl’s sake. With Grian, it was slower, but it happened all the same. Neither one of them could muster a fight against Pearl for long, anymore. Pearl knew this, and even as it irritated her, she exploited it. She leveled Grian a look that was *meant* to be nonchalant, but Jimmy knew all of his sibling’s expressions by heart. Pearl had an ace, and she was about to play it. “Besides, Grian, if we go into town, you can talk to the sheriff about it.”

And they wondered why Jimmy always won when they played cards.

She said the words like they were nothing, tossed over her shoulder as she reached for her hat on the peg and pinned it to her hair. Her back was turned to the result of her words, but Jimmy watched as Grian’s face shifted. His eyes took on a distinctive shimmer at the mere mention of Scar. Pearl’s words weren’t a card in Grian’s deck, or a chip on the table, they were a bone tossed to a ravenous dog, and all three of them knew it.

Grian rolled up the blueprints in a carefully practiced maneuver—fast enough that he didn’t waste time on it, but slowly enough that he didn’t seem to be rushing the action. *Ever the performer*, Jimmy found himself thinking.

Then he felt a bit bad for thinking it. It was a mite uncharitable, even if Jimmy thought it was mostly true. Grian couldn’t ever let himself *want* something, not properly. Not since they’d come to America. Jimmy had seen the *façade* of wanting things on Grian’s face, the way that he interacted with the others in town, maintaining a careful distance. He’d also seen Grian in the quiet moments he wasn’t meant to, when Grian looked at the house, the town, the *world*, like if he were given the chance, he’d eat it whole. He’d never met a man who simultaneously wanted so much, so desperately, and so little, so forcefully. Not until the moment Grian had set foot on that boat, looking for all the world like he was stepping up to the executioner’s block.

Jimmy shoved the memories down as he fixed his own hat onto his head and followed Pearl into the sunshine.

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The road into town felt longer and dustier in the heat. Jimmy wasn’t sure if it was the way the sun scorched down onto his clothes, making him feel like someone had wrapped him in tin foil and left him on top of the wood burner to cook, or the fact that his memory kept drifting away from him and stretching out into the past, but by the time the first houses shimmered up through the haze of the brush, he felt fit to burst out of his own skin.

They’d brought the wagon with them today, hitched to Grian’s buckskin, and Jimmy eyed it enviously. He wanted nothing more than to collapse onto the familiar wood and gain some respite from riding in the heat, but it was increasingly looking as though he’d collapse right onto the dusty road the moment he dismounted. He swiped some of the sweat from his forehead and urged Arrow forward, knowing the sooner they got into town, the better for the horses, as well as themselves.

Del Sombra sat sheltered between the red cliffs of a canyon in the northeast and a rushing river to the west. The looping road of the town made the most of the space, with shops and services huddled together atop the packed earth, only breaking apart long enough for a sliver of road to wind down toward where the mine sat at the base of the cliff.

The high cliffs lent Del Sombra her name, thanks to the long shadows brought about every dawn. The shade of the morning would have been a welcome reprieve from the summer heat, but by the time the Ratcliffes saw the first houses shimmer into view on the horizon, the sun sat heavily in the cradle of the sky.

They passed under the shadow of the church on the outskirts of town, and Jimmy shivered. The wood of it was sand and sun bleached, nearly blinding to look at at this time of day. Some of the townsfolk came and maintained the building and the little graveyard beside it on Sundays, but he knew the building itself had stood empty long before the three of them had rolled into town. The preacher had been the first one to succumb to the plague, and they hadn't managed to entice another one to stay since. Jimmy kept his eyes away from the tall windows.

Not that he expected to *see* anything, beyond perhaps a helpful person sweeping out the dust, or going up into the loft to organize whatever was left, or to polish the church bell. He certainly wasn't *afraid*. He didn't expect to see ghostly apparitions in the glass, or feel some deep-rooted sense of foreboding. He didn't believe in ghosts, or curses, or anything of the sort. He reminded himself that he was a man who counted himself to be thoroughly unstitious.

But when he'd gone in before—just the once, carrying a bucket up from the river for Sausage, after helping out in the Saloon—he couldn't help but compare the scissors trusses up in the ceiling to the ribs of the cow he'd helped Sausage butcher earlier that day.

He'd never admit to going faster as he passed the church, but he certainly never lingered. The shadows of Del Sombra seemed to agree—he didn't think he'd ever seen them reach the church. It was an impressive architectural feat, and if he'd ever wanted to look at the place longer than he had to, he might bring it up to Grian as the first step on the bridge between them, or an olive branch.

He stayed silent as they continued past.

A little farther on, however, they *did* slow as they looked over to the sheriff's house. It was a low, single-story house, rough hewn wood sanded smooth by time and care. A bench rested on the porch, covered in a blanket. This close to the river, there was enough grass for a garden, and Scar had capitalized on that. He had a small kitchen garden out in the front yard, and around the side of his house Jimmy could see the flowers that Scar favored drinking in the sunshine. A horseshoe glinted above the doorway, one that Jumbles had thrown a few weeks prior that had narrowly missed hitting Scar right in the face. Scar had declared it lucky.

Now *there* was a superstitious man, if ever Jimmy had seen one.

In his periphery, Jimmy could see Grian craning his neck to look at the house as well.

As if sensing her audience, Jellie, the sheriff's cat, hopped up onto the ledge of one of the windows and curled up in a ball against the warm glass. Jimmy grinned, satisfied, and despite the smile echoed on his brother's face, Jimmy knew that that wasn't what Grian had been waiting for at all.

Beyond the sheriff's abode, more houses peppered the landscape. In the light breeze, hanging linens waved to them as they approached. Then, as they crested an incline, the town sprang to life.

The kids weren't running wild in the road, *yet*, thanks to Gem taking up the role of schoolmistress, but there was plenty of foot traffic and other folks to make up for their absence. The roads weren't as crowded nor the walkways as much of a crush as they had been in London, but Jimmy thought that the noise alone did its level best to make up the difference.

Del Sombra was *loud*. Nothing like what Jimmy had expected when they first heard the story of the town ravaged by smallpox, trying to stumble back onto its feet. From the moment that the three of them had stepped off the train, the town itself had felt vibrant, alive. Despite the additional heat that extra people always bring with them, the moment the noise washed over him, Jimmy felt like he could breathe again.

"Rendezvous at--" Grian began, but he was cut off by a high, clear whistle. It cut through the noise like a hot knife through butter, and Grian sat a little straighter in his saddle. He sat the way they'd been taught to ride, shoulders back, posture perfect, as if the sun hadn't been leeching the energy from his bones the whole ride out. Jimmy straightened as well, even if not to a full English saddle. He waved in greeting at the man who had caught their attention.

The sheriff was leaning on the rail of the bank's porch, looking for all the world like he owned the place. He'd pulled off his hat and set it on the railing beside him. He was a handsome man, with a face prone to smiling, despite (or perhaps because of) the scars that had given him his name. His brown hair was rumpled where it didn't cling to his temples, and in the afternoon sunshine, his green eyes glittered like the leaves on his beloved poppies. The vest he usually wore was gone as well, his sleeves rolled to his elbows, both likely in concession to the heat. Despite having a full horse in height between them, Jimmy always felt that Scar's presence was the largest in any room he was in. How the man ever stood in the same room as Grian's ego and still managed to smile at them all was a mystery.

"Well now," Scar said by way of greeting, "there's a fine 'howdy-do'! Were you really going to ride on past without stopping to say hello to your dearest friend in town?" The words claimed admonishment, but the sly, easy grin on Scar's face belied all potential rebuke. He leaned forward, resting his chin on his hands.

When he leaned forward, Jimmy noticed his cane leaning against the wall behind him. He was using the white one, today. How Scar kept it in such pristine condition, Jimmy could only guess.

"We were planning to stop by on our way back," Grian said, as if Pearl and Jimmy hadn't both been asked on the way into town where they thought Scar might be at this hour. Jimmy ducked his head, trying not to smirk at Pearl.

Scar's smile melted into something softer, "If that's the case, I'd be much obliged if you joined me for dinner this evening." Scar's eyes flickered to Pearl and Jimmy and his smile went back to what it had been: pure sunshine, hold the vulnerability. "All of you," he added, and though it didn't sound like an afterthought, Jimmy knew it had to have been.

Jimmy eyed his brother and could tell in the set of his jaw what he was about to say. His body was turned towards Scar, giving him every ounce of his attention, and Jimmy was sure that if he could see Grian's eyes, they would be carefully, purposefully blank.

Jimmy held back a shudder at the thought of that look in Grian's tar-black eyes. How Scar could stand looking at *that* and still smile at Grian, too, was something Jimmy understood even less.

"We wouldn't want to intrude--" Grian began, a song and dance that Jimmy and Pearl knew all too well. Back home, the concept of not giving a host at least a day's notice before showing up for dinner was tantamount to an insult. Even if given a polite invitation, it was best to demur for at least a few days. 'I couldn't possibly *today*, but perhaps *Wednesday*—' was a familiar phrase.

In Del Sombra, though, Jimmy had noticed it was often the opposite.

"Good thing I've invited you, then!" Scar cut in, smoothly. Grian glanced back at his siblings, clearly looking for some kind of backup. Scar's words had knocked him off balance, though he didn't shift his posture in the slightest. Grian was floundering, wondering where in the script he ought to go next.

"Thank you, sheriff, that would be much appreciated," Jimmy cut in, before Grian could figure out where his voice had gone. "We'll meet you back here, then?"

"Oh, no," Scar said, turning that dazzling smile onto Jimmy, who couldn't help but grin right back, feeling like he was in on the joke for once. "Go ahead on down the road and let yourselves in if I'm not back, yet." Scar knocked on the railing and twirled his hat back onto his head with a flourish. It was probably unnecessary, but the thing of it was, it didn't *look* unnecessary when Scar did it. Not a single gesture he made was out of place. Jimmy longed for the kind of confidence that Scar exuded with every breath.

He tipped his hat at Jimmy and Pearl, but Jimmy didn't miss the way that his smile lingered an extra beat on Grian.

"See you then, Sheriff," Jimmy said, darting a look over to Pearl. He knew a dismissal when he saw one. She smirked at him and urged her dapple gray horse, Goose, forward. Jimmy followed suit. Behind them, he heard the murmur of voices, a sure sign that Grian had coughed up whatever hesitation it was that kept him from talking to Scar, sometimes.

"What's up with them?" he asked Pearl, once he was sure they were out of earshot. The way Pearl looked at him seemed to speak volumes. "What?" he demanded, feeling a prickle at the back of his neck, a whisper. *You've missed something again.* "Have they been rowing? It's been real hot and cold from Grian, lately."

“No, they haven’t had a row,” Pearl rolled her eyes. She went quiet, the way she did sometimes when she really wanted to think about her words. Jimmy could practically see her rolling them around on her tongue, like a sweet she didn’t quite enjoy the flavor of. Eventually she spat it out, “I think he’s afraid to get close to anyone here.”

The words hit Jimmy in the teeth and sunk to his gut like a stone. He’d thought it himself, not an hour ago, but it was different, coming from Pearl. His heart started to race. They’d run so bloody far already; Jimmy didn’t want to keep going. When he spoke again, his words sounded bare, tinny to his ears, stripped of all emotion, save fear.

“He thinks we’ll have to leave again.” It wasn’t a question. Pearl didn’t supply it with an answer.

Pearl shrugged. She was scanning the street, probably looking for an out, or, more likely, for a sign that Gem had dismissed the children for the day.

Jimmy scrambled for a way to keep the conversation on topic. A ball of fluff, sunning herself in the window of Cleo’s shop caught his eye.

“What about the cats?” he demanded, his voice desperate, “we can’t just leave the cats.”

Del Sombra was lousy with strays, and one of the first things that Grian had done was sneak one up to the room he and Jimmy had shared at the bunkhouse. He’d named her Pearl, allegedly because the first thing she’d done was try to bite him. Pearl—their *sister*, not the cat—had rolled her eyes when Grian had announced her name. Another mouser had joined them since they took over the corral. Jimmy had thought it was a good sign.

“Jimmy—” Pearl sighed, in her ‘you’re being unreasonable’ tone. The line of fear in him went taut. That was her *Jimmy stop talking* voice. He felt sick.

He was wrong though. He had to be.

Jimmy shoved forward and blocked her path with his horse, forcing her to look him in the eye. He leaned closer, pitching his voice low.

“What *happened*, Pearl?” he asked, instead of *convince me*. Or *why are we running? Why the hell are we still running?*

He didn’t have to elaborate; he didn’t have to say a damn word more. Her face darkened, and she glared at him. He didn’t back off.

“I don’t remember,” she hissed.

Jimmy felt the fear in his bones burn away beneath a hot flush of anger.

I don’t remember, she said, the same way she’d said *Jimmy did it* or *I would never lie to you* when they were children. Each word carefully enunciated, but too pronounced, too rushed. She got the words out fast, like they were still seven years old, and if she spoke first, her story would be the one their governess believed.

He took a deep breath and tried to convince himself that she wouldn't lie about this. That he believed her. He *had* to believe her.

If he didn't, it meant that Grian wasn't the only one lying to him, and he'd uprooted his life and run halfway across the world for people who wouldn't trust him as far as they could throw him.

He shook his head.

She doesn't remember, he told himself, firm. *It's been years, she might sound different when she lies now*, he told himself. *Maybe she just doesn't want to get caught talking about this by Grian*, he told himself.

This was a familiar mantra.

And anyway, he'd seen the state she was in when Grian had lain her on the chaise in the parlor of their London apartment. How pale she'd been. How she hadn't woken until their third day at sea, and only then to speak a load of rubbish and fall back asleep for another two.

You called them, but something else answered your invitation. Why would they act, when they can watch?

Nonsense words, Jimmy told himself then, as he told himself now.

It didn't stop the ice from dripping down his spine as he thought about the way Pearl had said them, or the way Grian had reacted to them. Jimmy had pretended not to know that it wasn't seasickness that had his brother dry heaving over the side of the ship.

He shut away the twisting feeling of uncertainty and grimaced at Pearl.

"He hasn't told you anything?" he asked, nodding toward where Grian was still talking to Scar. He trusted Pearl to tell him the truth. He trusted Grian to not get them killed, but only barely, anymore.

"No," she sounded exhausted, the way she did whenever Jimmy asked about that night. A sliver of shame worked its way between his ribs, the way it always did. He closed his eyes. It was easier to pretend he didn't know what it looked like when she lied to him when he couldn't see her.

"Sorry Pearl," he murmured, opening his eyes again so he could reach out and grip her hand over the reins. She closed her eyes for a moment, looking pained, then gave him a wan smile and squeezed back.

"If anything comes to me, I'll tell you first," she swore, even though she still wouldn't look at him. And then, because not even Pearl could be nice to him, "Heavens above your hands are sweaty."

Jimmy made a noise that rivaled a crow's squawk, indignant, and pulled his hand back, wiping it off on his denims.

“What are you two on about?” Grian asked, finally catching up to them.

Jimmy didn’t want him to know about his questions. The last time he’d asked *Grian* for details, the man had about lost his last marble.

“Asking Pearl if she thinks I really ought to go through with the new boots.” Jimmy lied, determined not to feel guilty about doing so.

“Stars and garters, *yes*,” Grian said, his voice taking on a desperate tinge. “If it’s money you’re worried about, stop. I’ll head to the bank *myself* and hand it to the cobbler. It’s got to be ten kinds of macabre, wearing those boots you have now.”

“They’re good boots!”

“Don’t forget bad luck,” Pearl put in, quickly taking up the fight against Jimmy’s footwear. When he looked at her, she gave him a small smile, both gratitude and apology written in the lines at the corners of her mouth. “Besides, they’re already done. It’d be downright rude to flake on the girl now.”

“Fine,” Jimmy sighed, as if he’d really needed convincing. “But I’m getting these patched up, too, as backups.”

“Or you could bury them with the man that they belong to.” Grian mumbled.

“He was buried in his Sunday best, Grian! He doesn’t *need* a second pair of boots clogging up his grave.” Jimmy protested as he turned his horse back to continue the trek into town.

They didn’t get far, their bickering cut off by another voice calling to them from across the road.

“Pearl!”

Jimmy watched as one of the girls from the Florists gathered her skirts and hurried out onto the road. Jimmy felt his cheeks heat as one of the other girls winked at him and blew a kiss from an upper-story window. He became very suddenly and intently interested in the quality of stitching on Arrow’s bridle.

“Rose,” Pearl greeted her with a smile. All of Alice’s girls had floral names, to go with the name of the establishment. They’d known Rose and Daisy the longest, back when they were still going by Bonnie and Mary, on the way to Del Sombra. They’d been a little worse for wear, thanks to their journey thus far, but they’d told the trio that Del Sombra was thriving, finally picking up again after being ravaged by smallpox. The mine was a draw, as was the railroad, bringing tradesmen from across America.

Where commerce was strong, the working women went.

Bonnie—Rose, now—had been in the worst shape when they’d met her and the others. And Pearl had—

Jimmy still had trouble voicing it. Contextualizing it. After, it hadn't taken either him or Grian a *ton* of convincing to make Del Sombra their next stop. Jimmy had been sure that he'd hallucinated it, but when Rose had flown out of the front door of the Florists to throw her arms around Pearl, he'd known it had to be real. When Grian had agreed, to stay, Jimmy had hoped it meant that Grian thought they were safe. Now? He wasn't so sure.

Despite the heat and the mad dash across the road, Rose's hair still looked perfect. Her tanned skin had a rosy glow to it, and her dress was tailored perfectly to claim modesty while still showing off her figure. Not that Jimmy was looking, of course.

She reached out to steady herself on Goose's neck, and leaned toward Pearl, her voice low and urgent, "One of our girls is in a state. A man off yesterday's train didn't take kindly to Miss Alice's rules. The sheriff had him cool his heels in a cell overnight and dumped him on the first train out this morning, but Posy..." she trailed off, her face twisting. It didn't take a large stretch of imagination to know what sort of state Posy might be in. *Especially* if Rose was asking for Pearl's help.

"Bastard," Jimmy swore under his breath. Grian made a disapproving noise at his language, but Rose smiled at him. She'd clearly been thinking the same, if not worse.

Pearl was already getting off her horse.

"Have you called for Cub, yet?" Pearl asked as she handed over the reins to Jimmy.

"Doc gave her something for the pain, but I told Miss Alice you'd want to see her, too." Rose said, giving Pearl a hand to steady her. Pearl started at her words, swinging around to look at her sharply.

"Did you tell her—" she began, but Rose was already shaking her head.

"Not a word," she vowed, "And if anyone asks it's the laudanum and the makeup what did the trick."

Rose had been in terrible shape, when Jimmy let himself remember. Half of her body covered in bruises, like she'd been shoved in front of a runaway cart. And Pearl had reached out, simple as anything, and touched her face. Jimmy wouldn't believe it if he hadn't seen it with his own eyes, would believe anyone who had told him what had happened had gone mad. And yet, the moment that Pearl's fingers had brushed against Rose's cheek, the bruises had faded, the cuts on her skin knitted back together, and Pearl had *healed* her.

Jimmy still hardly believed it himself. He'd looked at Grian, intent on demanding whether or not Grian had known she could do this, but Grian's eyes never left Pearl's hands, a hollow, haunted look on his face that scared Jimmy more than the thought of his sister suddenly having the power to heal people with a touch. His eyes had seemed to be trying to swallow the scene whole, to keep it from ever happening again. For the first time in his life, Jimmy had elected to hold his tongue.

"Thank you," Pearl said, relief coating her words. She turned to Jimmy and handed him her reins. "If you see Gem, let her know I've popped in to check on Posy, would you?"

“Sure,” he agreed, but she was already off. He smiled politely at Rose and tipped his hat to her, hoping he didn’t look as silly as he felt. With a smile and a wave, she was off after Pearl, catching up to her and hooking an arm through Pearl’s elbow to steer her where they needed to go without interruption.

Jimmy wanted to say something, because back then neither of them had said *anything*, and now and then he *still* almost fancied that he’d imagined the whole thing. But when he turned to Grian, the space he’d been was empty. Jimmy craned his neck and saw Grian hitching his horse outside of the bank. He sighed, expelling all of the words he’d half cooked up in his head, and resigned himself to the fact that this was a family where you simply didn’t talk about anything.

He glanced back across the road and caught sight of movement in one of the upper windows. Daisy was reaching for the curtains, clearly fixing to pull them closed, but she paused when she caught his eye. She gave him a wan, worried smile and a little wave. He tried his best to turn his grimace into a smile in return and waved back. She gave a start and shuffled to the side, making way for another woman. It wasn’t Rose or Pearl, as Jimmy had expected. Instead, he found himself catching the ice-blue eyes of Miss Alice Eakley, the proprietress of the Florists. He tried to turn the wave into a tip of his hat, like Scar might. He had a feeling it didn’t come off nearly as charming as he’d hoped.

Alice frowned down at him, and Jimmy found himself fumbling with Goose’s reins, clicking to move them along as fast as he could. When he found the stomach to glance back up, he saw that the curtains had been drawn tight. He fought back a chill.

He’d never say as much to a living soul, but Miss Alice scared the daylights out of him. He’d met mothers less protective of their daughters than Miss Alice was of her girls.

Though, given the circumstances, Jimmy realized that maybe she had a good reason for that.

He tied up Goose outside of Sausage’s saloon, making sure to duck inside and wave hello to the man of the house as he bustled around. He got a grin and a wave in return, but no more as he was swept away by his customers. It didn’t matter to Jimmy, really. Sausage had a way about him that tended to lift Jimmy’s spirits without saying a word. He’d pop by later, he decided, when it wasn’t so busy.

The sun seemed almost oppressively hot when he made his way back outside, but he swung himself back into the saddle all the same and made his way to the other side of town, toward where Shelby had set up shop.

He passed Scott’s shop on his way, noticing the man of the hour by his hair, first, and felt a bit of a twinge in his chest. Maybe it was the fact that he’d just been thinking about her, but for the first time the sight of Scott’s ginger curls put him in mind of Lizzie, and her more sedate reddish-blond locks. He swallowed the pang of homesickness as Scott noticed him, too.

“Morning, Jimmy,” he called, sounding distracted. Jimmy wasn’t surprised, he’d been much busier of late, as people found themselves suddenly in possession of more income than they’d had previously. *Fashion* was the fad of the day, and Jimmy couldn’t be happier for his friend.

He missed seeing him at the saloon in the evenings, but he knew that Scott was eating, at least, thanks to Sausage and Hermès making semi-regular deliveries.

“Morning, Scott!” Jimmy replied, making his way over. He tried to inject a sense of life and excitement into his words that he wasn’t necessarily feeling this morning and was relieved when Scott didn’t call him on it. “Need a hand with that?” he nodded to the basket Scott was holding.

“Don’t you dare,” Scott warned, half of a laugh in his voice, “I’ve got everything how I need it and I do *not* need a repeat of last time.”

“Aw, c’mon mate, that was an accident!” Jimmy complained, his ears burning at the memory of trying to help carry Scott’s shipment over from the station, and then having to help *more* by washing out the new fabrics when he proceeded to drop everything in the street when he nearly walked in the way of a passing stagecoach.

Scott leveled him with a raised eyebrow, a better deterrent than a gun would ever be. Jimmy raised his hands in surrender and backed away.

“Okay, okay,” he said, over the top, so Scott didn’t have to worry that he was really upset. “I can tell when I’m not wanted, sheesh!” Scott shifted the basket in his arms and rolled his eyes as Jimmy turned to leave.

“Don’t let a cart hit you, you coot,” Scott called over his shoulder as he maneuvered his way back inside, a hint of a smile on his face. He paused for a moment and added, “come by next week, I’ll be in dire need of a break by then.”

“Godspeed,” Jimmy said, eyeing the basket and noticing how full it was—judging by that alone, it would be longer than a week before Scott was finished.

The door swung shut behind his friend as Jimmy turned on his heel, pointing himself back in the direction of Shelby’s.

Shelby’s shop smelled of leather cleaner and wood polish and was, blissfully, in the shadows of the taller general store, helping to keep it cooler than some of the other buildings tended to be. The bell over the door jingled as Jimmy entered, and Shelby popped up from behind the counter, a smile already in place, ready to greet whoever her latest customer was. Unlike Rose, her dark hair was coming free from the updo she had it in, and Jimmy could see from here that she had a pencil shoved inside of the knot at the back of her neck, nevermind that the leather apron he never saw her without had pockets for that exact purpose.

“Jimmy!” she called, “I was wondering if you were ever going to show up.”

“Aw, you couldn’t keep me away if you tried,” he said, aiming for jovial even as she darted into the back. He winced as he heard something crash, but before he could ask if she needed a hand, she reappeared from behind the curtain she’d hung in the doorway, holding a box. She hooked an arm through Jimmy’s and led him over to the chair she had in the corner for her clients, chattering all the way. Shelby was a woman who had long since forgone propriety in favor of enthusiasm.

“This is some of my best work, if I do say so myself. I know you said you didn’t need any ornamentation or anything, but I tell you now, Jimmy, the leather *spoke* to me and told me just what you needed,” she must have seen the look on his face, because she laughed and patted his shoulder, placing the box in his lap. “Nothing *crazy*, don’t you worry. I know better than to give you something you won’t like. Sure, you’d take it and pay for it and all, just to be polite, but I’d see you wearing those silly English shoes you walked off the train in. Make no mistake, I’d rather eat shoe polish for the rest of my life than let you go back to those flimsy things, when you can have proper boots.”

Jimmy’s protest that his old shoes weren’t *flimsy* died on his tongue as he slid the lid off of the box and revealed the boots within.

The leather was stained a rich brown and was smooth to the touch. The toes were rounded, a compromise between the sharper pointed cut ideal for riding, and the square toe he’d thought he’d need for the general work around the corral. Given most of his work would be with the horses, Shelby had insisted that he go the compromise route. The stitching was done in a lively yellow thread, just enough of a contrast that he was able to see the stitches, while blending in enough to avoid ostentation.

But what really took his breath away was the stamp and stitched design she’d done on the sides, in that same yellow thread, two mirrored feathers, curving toward each other. It was a subtle design, she’d clearly kept his request in mind, but even he couldn’t deny the beauty in the craftsmanship. He turned to her, where she had crouched to his level, her elbows on her knees, her hands clasped beneath her chin as she waited for his verdict.

“They’re really beautiful, Shubs,” he said, after a moment. “But you have to know that I’ll be wearing these ‘til I’ve trashed them.”

She laughed, reaching out to swat at his arm, “I hope so, that’s why I made them!” she sobered a bit, her smile going a tinge sad. “Mr. Ramos was a different man, with different needs from his boots,” she said, nodding towards his feet. “He had the sort of personality that requires plain boots. *You* have been swallowing your teeth since the moment you stepped off that train. I reckon the only time you’ve ever said a word against someone was in the confines of that house you share with Pearl and Grian, and probably right to his face, too.” she raised an eyebrow and Jimmy flushed, looking back down at the box in his hands. “You needed something that speaks to who you are and lets you spread your metaphorical wings.”

“Hence the feathers?” he asked, a wry smile tugging at his mouth. He glanced back over at her.

“Now you’re getting it!” she stood up and beckoned at him, “Try them on, I want to make sure I didn’t spend countless midnights making these things for nothing.”

He huffed a laugh at her enthusiasm, but obligingly slid off the old boots and slipped on the new ones, reveling in the slide of the tanned leather seeming to mold directly to his feet. His town shoes had pinched, and Mr. Ramos’s boots had been a smidge too big on him in the ankles. They’d clearly been made for someone else, and the town shoes had been made for Jimmy before they set out on their journey, meant mainly for the sort of man who didn’t walk half as much as Jimmy had learned to.

These fit like a glove, as he was sure Shelby already knew. All the same, he stood and did a small turn about the room. Her satisfied smile said she already knew what he was going to say before he said it, “They’re perfect, as promised.”

“Of course they are,” she scoffed, but she was beaming, “I don’t do shoddy work.”

“Speaking of,” Jimmy nodded at the old, dusty boots, such a far cry from what he was wearing now. “Would you be able to patch those up for me? I doubt I’ll ever wear them again, but...” he trailed off, not really sure how to continue. ‘But I don’t want them to just be ruined,’ didn’t quite encapsulate his feelings, and ‘but I wanted to get them fixed to thank the man who never actually intended anyone else to wear them,’ sounded... strange, even to him.

“Say no more,” she said, leaning to pick them up. In her hands, they already looked a little more alive.

“Thank you, Shelby,” he said. He felt a bit of the tension he’d been carrying slide away. The words felt woefully insufficient, but she didn’t let him stay maudlin about it for long.

“Now, if you’ll walk those new boots over to my counter, we can talk about payment.”

~

Goose, Jimmy noticed on his way out of Shelby’s, was no longer at Sausage’s saloon. Pearl must have picked him up and gone to see Gem. He led Arrow over to where Goose had been hitched and took a minute to make sure his horse was comfortable before he went inside. He’d take the saddle and bridle off properly once they got to Scar’s, but for now he checked that nothing was pinching and everything sat the way it should.

Inside, the saloon was less busy, but still loud, the rush from this morning’s travelers finally tapering off as they went about their business in town. It would pick up again this evening, after the miners came back for the night. For now, though, Jimmy had to blink a few times to get his eyes to adjust to the lower light. He found Sausage inside, sitting at one of the tables nearest the bar, paper scattered across the tabletop in front of him.

At the wash of light from the door opening, Sausage looked up. He squinted in Jimmy’s direction for a moment, and Jimmy waved, stepping out of the harsh light and deeper into the saloon. Once Sausage was able to see his face, a smile replaced the squint, and he stood from his table, crossing the floor in a few long strides toward Jimmy.

“Jimmy!” he greeted, his voice as jovial as ever, “You just missed Pearl, she and Gem went—Hermès, *no!*”

The words did not escape Sausage’s mouth in time to stop the cannonball that was his son from plowing into Jimmy’s legs at full speed. Jimmy wobbled but managed to stay standing by sheer luck.

At all of seven years old, Hermès barely came up to Jimmy’s hip, but he hugged with the ferocity of a charging bison.

“*Hola*, Tio Timmy!” Jimmy smiled, even as he sighed at the use of the nickname. He was only ‘Tio’ by virtue of being Pearl’s brother, and really, he should have felt lucky, given Grian didn’t even get *that* much. It probably helped that when asked, Jimmy had been more than happy to tell him stories about their ‘adventures’ on the high seas.

“It’s Jimmy, Hermès,” Sausage reminded him, pretending not to laugh. “Remember?”

“That’s not what Tia Pearla calls him!” Hermès objected. Jimmy groaned, good-naturedly. It *would* be Pearl and Grian’s mission in life to get the next generations to continue calling him the wrong name. Sausage smiled at him in a “what can you do” sort of fashion. Hermès lit up suddenly, releasing Jimmy’s leg. “Did you bring Arrow?”

“She’s outside,” Jimmy confirmed.

Hermès was gone in a flash, “Tio Timmy” forgotten in the face of getting to feed his horse what promised to be at least one sugar cube, based on the way that he was holding his hand in his pocket. Jimmy turned back to his friend, who was looking at the spot Hermès had been fondly.

Jimmy nodded to the paperwork with a wry grin. “Don’t let me keep you,” he said, just to hear Sausage groan and swear at him.

He sidled up to the bar. One of the girls who helped Sausage was in front of him with a shandy before he could even flag her down. After a few minutes, she ducked out from behind the bar to attend to another group, and Sausage took her place, papers hidden in a folio as he glared at Jimmy good-naturedly and disappeared into the back. Jimmy raised his glass to his friend as he vanished behind the curtain into the kitchen. He was always happy to be a distraction, but he knew Sausage was having to put more time into his books and order forms wherever he could as trade in Del Sombra picked up and more money flowed.

After a spell, the little world tucked inside of the saloon calmed and quieted. Jimmy sipped his drink as he watched Sausage slip back out from the kitchen and behind the bar, wiping his forehead on his sleeve. He beamed at Jimmy, his alleged irritation forgotten. He leaned against the wood of the bar with a drawn-out noise of exhaustion.

“Oh my goodness, Jimmy! You would not believe the day I’ve had—”

Jimmy took his cue and propped his hand on his fist.

“What have you got for me?” he asked, voice light.

“Who needs little old ladies to be a town gossip, hey?” Sausage teased. “Let’s see, let’s see... *I’m* plotting the construction of a little brewery downstairs. There’s enough travel now that I need to think about stocking beer, but there’s no way to import it, the way there is with the whiskey or Aguardiente. When the time comes I’ll need some strapping young gentleman to help with construction, naturally,” Sausage said, batting his eyes at Jimmy in a way that put Jimmy in mind of the girl at the Florists who had blown him a kiss. He felt the tips of his ears color and was glad for the dimmer lighting of the saloon.

He laughed at the obvious hint and tipped his glass in Sausage's direction. "Name the day," he said, knowing full well that it would be more than just the one day that he was committing to.

"*Gracias, wey,*" Sausage said, motioning for Jimmy to lift his drink so Sausage could wipe down the counter beneath it. He hummed as he continued thinking. "Scott's been contracted to make Alice's girls something new," Sausage said, as if sensing where Jimmy's thoughts had been a few moments ago. He winked. Jimmy rolled his eyes. Pointedly. It was a point of near contention between the two that Jimmy seemed uninterested in *anyone* in town. Sausage had taken it to mean that he was simply being extra secretive about it, which meant it had to be a *big* secret, with a *bigger* reason.

Sausage didn't know the half of it.

"Anything *else*? Scott's good at his job, we all know that." That did also explain the large order Scott had been handling earlier. Maybe Jimmy would need to catch him sooner than later. If it was something as intricate as an order for Miss Alice, he might need to get out of his own head.

Sausage smiled, something smaller, private and pleased.

"He is, isn't he?" he said. Then again, Jimmy thought, narrowing his eyes, maybe *not*. Sausage might have that well-handled. Before he could press the matter, Sausage perked back up and continued. "Well, since you *asked*—"

Jimmy took a sip of his drink and let it go. He'd hold onto the question for later, or never, he decided as he let Sausage's words cascade over him. He listened as his friend wiped down the bar and restocked it, his voice climbing in pitch and muffling as he wandered back into the kitchen or down into the cellar, updating Jimmy not just on his *day*, but on the little things he'd missed on the days since he was last in town, and the rumors that Sausage and the girls who helped him out picked up on here and there. Jimmy hummed and awed at the right moments, letting Sausage's energy bolster him. It was one of his friend's many talents, the ability to bring Jimmy's spirits up and get a laugh out of him no matter how blue he was.

"—And *apparently*—*Dios mio*, you won't believe this—there's rumblings of a new rail war. Can you believe that? Here I thought we were all pretending to be civilized people now!"

Jimmy perked up. They'd gotten lucky on their way across America and hadn't run into any of the 'railroad wars' that had plagued many sections of the transcontinental railroad, but he'd heard of them. There was a newspaper gathering dust in his suitcase that compared one of the more recent ones to the one between the Sacramento Valley Company and Central Pacific Company. That had been back in the 60's, of course, and many such disputes had since moved into the courtroom, but he'd also heard plenty of stories across their trek from people who had experienced the more violent encounters—workers under the cover of night who had blown up sections of railroad track, sabotaged engines, stolen fuel—anything that could get a man ahead in the game that was establishing a railroad company. Grian had called his fascination with the stories 'obsessive.' Jimmy preferred the term 'pragmatic.'

“Worst of it is,” Sausage continued, gleeful because he always knew when he had a worm on a hook, “they say that the dispute is headed to Del Sombra.”

“Aren’t these disputes usually about *building* new rails?” Jimmy asked, hoping Sausage was just adding this for flavor. Sausage shrugged, wiping down a glass.

“Could be that they want to connect us up to La Belle? It could be that,” Sausage mused. Jimmy had to concede the point, though it didn’t make much sense, since they were already hooked up to Lonesome Hill, La Belle’s sister city. Then again, if the mayor of La Belle had managed to get a couple of rail companies intrigued enough to build there, it was good news for the little mining town. The poor folks at La Belle had had nearly as bad a time as Del Sombra, from what Jimmy remembered when they were passing through on their way to Lonesome Hill.

“Any idea who’s involved?” Jimmy asked, already running through the companies he knew of that were willing to start fighting for a line all the way out here. Sausage hummed, thinking.

“Oh!” he said, slapping his palm down on the counter. Jimmy hadn’t been expecting it, but he was used enough twice over to Sausage’s enthusiasm that he didn’t startle. “I remember now, the gentleman who was all flustered over it was talking about the Denver and Rio Grande Company,” Sausage said, triumphant. That made sense, Jimmy thought. They were small enough yet that getting any more track to their names would help them out. “And the other one—this was the interesting thing—the other one I hadn’t heard of before. He called it the *Littlewood Line*.”

Jimmy thought he would have preferred it if Sausage had picked up his drink and dumped it straight over his head.

“The... what?” he asked, weakly.

It can’t be, he told himself, *get it together*.

He didn’t look at Sausage’s hands, and he didn’t look at his own. He knew he’d be seeing Grian’s fingers in his nightmares tonight, stained with blood on top of blood as Jimmy tried to pry the steel wool away from him.

“The Littlewood Line!” Sausage said, not picking up on the way that Jimmy had gone purposely, carefully still. “Like I said, *I’d* never heard of it before, but newcomers crop up every day.”

“Sure do,” Jimmy rasped, feeling like the heat had finally gotten to him. His head was spinning a little bit, and he tried not to see echoes of Martyn’s smile in the way Sausage grinned at him.

“Y’alright there, Jimmy?” Sausage asked after a moment. The echoes had vanished, because Sausage had stopped smiling. He was staring at Jimmy with a sudden look of worry creasing around his eyes.

Jimmy did not feel *alright*. He wondered what he must look like, for Sausage to look so worried so suddenly.

"I'm fine," he said, the words falling from his mouth before he could second-guess them. He had to be fine. One of them had to be fine.

"You sure?" Sausage asked, suspicious. Whatever he'd heard in Jimmy's voice proved only to convince him of the opposite. "You're looking a little peaked, there. Looking a little pale, even for you."

"Come off it, Sausage," Jimmy said, trying to inject some of his usual vigor into it. "I'm totally fine! Lookit me, picture of health over here."

Before Sausage could disagree, Jimmy downed the rest of his drink and dropped a couple of coins on the table. He didn't know for sure if they were the right coins, but Sausage would tell him later if he'd shortchanged him.

"Look at that, best be off, can't keep the sheriff waiting," he said, feeling the words hit the ground between him and Sausage like stones in his pockets.

"Jimmy—" Sausage called after him, but Jimmy's only response was the creak of the batwing doors behind him as he raced back out into the waning sunshine and the breeze coming up from the river. The shadows from the cliff face that backed Del Sombra seemed to reach for him, wrapping him up in a comforting chill. The sun blazed in his eyes as he unhitched Arrow, turned his back on the saloon, and pointed himself towards Scar's house.

~

Jimmy wasn't surprised to see that he was the first one to arrive at Scar's house. He led Arrow around the side of the house to where Scar had set aside space for Jumbles to graze.

His hands weren't shaking anymore, but he was finding it hard to rid himself of the sick slide of despair clinging to his limbs. He spent a minute longer with Arrow, removing her saddle and tack and using the tools that Scar had in the chest in his stable to brush her down. He focused on the rhythm of the motions, the familiarity of it, the way that the thick smell of *horse* drove the metallic sting of remembered blood from his nose. By the time she started to look annoyed with him, he'd managed to lock his emotions back away enough to breathe again. He patted her flank apologetically and left her to graze on the hay in the fenced yard.

Inside, he put his hat on a hook and pretended to debate for a moment what he would do with his time. He considered, vaguely, sweeping up the dirt he'd tracked inside, or taking down one of the books Scar had on his shelves and pretending to read it. Then, after considering all of the options carefully, he walked out through the backdoor and went to the small shed in Scar's backyard.

Today, more than ever, he felt like he needed to be strong, to protect them all. Maybe it was the echo of Martyn's name in his ears for the first time in over a year, maybe it was the way the sun shone in his eyes and made him feel like he was being watched. It didn't matter.

He picked up the twin revolvers on the low table inside of the shed, resting their weight in his palms. He was used to them, now.

Six months ago, Scar had confiscated them off a belligerent drunkard, taken one look at Jimmy, and sworn to teach him how to shoot.

So, Jimmy had come, twice a week, and learned how to hold them, how to shoot, then how to shoot *straight*. Finally, he'd been taught how to, as Scar called it, "shoot crooked."

They're not toys, Jimmy, but the better you get, the safer you'll be.

That had been his second lesson. As Jimmy pulled one free of the holster and spun it in his palm, looking for all the world like a sharpshooter at a traveling carny, he remembered the first:

Put on a show, and they'll forget you're holding a weapon.

Holding a gun, to Scar, was more of an art form than shooting one would ever be. Jimmy had spent more time ensuring he wouldn't drop the gun the first time he drew it than he would have ever considered possible.

Recently they'd been putting lessons one and two together, teaching Jimmy to shoot after putting on a show, making him a far deadlier marksman than Jimmy was entirely comfortable with, but even so, he still didn't have Scar's speed or precision with the weapons. Watching the man shoot was, and he'd never say this to the man's face, like watching one of the florists walk the floor at Sausage's saloon, mingling with the tourists and lonesome locals alike. It was a dance that he'd perfected, and as good as Jimmy had gotten, he still felt like a fumbling foal in comparison.

He hung the belt around his waist, letting the weight of the twin pistols nestle against his hipbones and slid the gun back where it went.

Jimmy took the bag of cans the sheriff collected from the townsfolk and walked outside. It was a matter of a minute to set up the range, and then it was back to the single board by the back door, hammered into the dirt where Scar had measured his longest shots to be.

He didn't do anything fancy for the first six cans, using them to warm back up to the weapons. Three with his left hand, three with his right. The three on the left went down with shots in the center, though the three on the right drifted a little.

Jimmy grimaced, flexing phantom pains from his left hand. He'd have to work harder to correct the aim on his right. He tried to shove away the irritation, the expectation that he'd be just as good right-handed, if not better, given all the effort that had gone into making him right-handed in the first place.

He reset the range, focusing on his right hand, this time. He kept his aim steady, focused, *slower*.

All six went down, easy.

Satisfied, Jimmy reset the range for the third time.

This time, he spun both guns into his palms, and by the time his arm was raised, and the gun was seated solidly in the palm of his hand, the barrel would be right where he needed it to be.

Down went the first two cans.

Before the smoke had cleared from the barrels, he had his arms moving, aiming toward where he'd set up the other cans, one on either side of the range, a pair of enemies who'd split from his original target.

He took down the third can with a sure shot from his left.

On the fourth shot, his fingers went leaden. He wasn't moving fast enough.

Jimmy swore.

He could see how it would go, in his mind's eye. He'd drop the gun. It would go off, to catastrophic effect.

He kept ahold of it, if only barely. He didn't want to drop it and send a stray shot through the sheriff's window. Or his own leg. He shoved it back into the holster, with more force than was probably necessary, and swung his whole body to aim with his left.

The fourth can went down, with far more anger behind the shot than Jimmy wanted to admit.

By the time he lowered the gun again, he was swearing. He stomped back inside, fuming at himself.

He came up short when he saw who was at the table ahead of him. He felt his cheeks heat, shame coloring his vision as his eyes adjusted.

Scar raised his bottle in a half-salute and took another drink, a smirk already present on his face.

"You're getting better," he said.

"You keep saying that." Jimmy unholstered the guns and set about the process of unloading and cleaning them, the way Scar had showed him the first day he'd decided to take Jimmy under his wing.

"You keep getting better," Scar shrugged, as if it were that simple. Jimmy shook his head and slumped in his chair, pressing the heels of his palms against his eyes, if only so he wouldn't have to see the look on Scar's face.

"I'm still rubbish with my right," he muttered. Scar scoffed.

"What a load of hokum! You're not 'rubbish with your right.' You're *less* rubbish with your right." Scar said. He picked up the rag on the table and shook it out, taking over the cleaning process on the second gun. "You keep getting in your own way, is all."

“It’s not like I’m doing it on *purpose*,” Jimmy grumbled, flicking open the chamber on the other gun to unload it.

Scar hummed, clearly sensing a dangerous topic. He let it slide. For a moment, Jimmy thought that would be it, that he could relax until Grian and Pearl arrived and he had to put the show back on.

Oh, what a fool he was.

Scar, who had clearly been waiting for him to relax, made a sound. The sort of ‘I just remembered something’ sound that Jimmy knew was clearly rehearsed. He thought he might be one of the few people in town who could recognize it for what it was.

“Do you remember what I asked you, a few weeks back?”

Jimmy thought back, his brow furrowed as he tried to figure out what Scar was referring to. He remembered and discarded a few things, mostly about where they’d come from, what they’d done before coming to America, things that Grian had told him to be secretive about, and that Scar was *deadly* curious about.

Clearly sensing that he needed a hint, Scar added, “You laughed in my face at the time, but it was a *primo* offer, if you ask me.”

It hit him in a rush, a memory of bringing Scar lunch at the sheriff’s office, because he hadn’t had the time to get it himself. Scar had been haggard, clearly sleep deprived and half-starved, and Jimmy had chalked the offer up to delirium and dramatic gratitude at seeing food for the first time since sunrise.

“Jimmy! My best pal, my favorite Ratcliff, savior of men—”

There was no delirium to his tone now, only calm, quiet assurance.

“You don’t mean—” he began.

“—how would you like to be Deputy of Del Sombra? I could clearly use the help!”

“Course I mean it,” Scar scoffed, “I meant it then, I mean it now. Have you had time to think about it?”

“I mean, I’d love to, *obviously*,” Jimmy said, the last word tacked on as half a laugh, because he still couldn’t quite believe that Scar was being serious.

“Good—” Scar said, clearly intending to take that as Jimmy’s acceptance. Panic erupted in Jimmy’s chest, and he cut Scar off.

“But you can’t be serious!” he exclaimed, “I mean, me? C’mon, me?”

“Why not you?”

“I’m—” Jimmy began, floundering at the brutal honesty of the question. There were a dozen reasons, surely, but he couldn’t think of any. “I’m—I mean, I’m not from around here.”

“Neither was I,” Scar shrugged. “Didn’t stop anyone from handing me the badge.”

“I can’t even shoot right, Scar!” Jimmy protested. His heart was pounding, his breath coming too fast. He wanted to say yes, and that had him scared. “And I’m—just me,” he finished, knowing it wasn’t anything like what the fancy lawmen at the courthouse would finish their indictments with, but it felt just as final to say it.

Scar was silent for a bit, long enough that Jimmy started wondering how he could take the words back, wanting to bridge the gap of the silence, if nothing else. He opened his mouth to apologize, but Scar spoke before he could, “Y’know, before I was sheriff of Del Sombra, I never loaded my gun.” At Jimmy’s clear look of disbelief, the corner of his mouth turned up, and he shrugged. “I had one, sure, but I counted that I’d be able to talk myself out of any scrape I talked myself into. Then I got here, and bam! In the span of a few months, I had to walk the way I talked, not just for my sake, but for everyone left.”

There was something achingly sad in the way Scar said *everyone left*, that made Jimmy think that Scar blamed himself for the deaths of everyone he couldn’t save, even the ones who had died before he’d gotten there.

Jimmy genuinely couldn’t envision Scar *not* being the sheriff of Del Sombra. He seemed like the sort of man who *had* to be in charge of someplace. But the story went that he came to Del Sombra right before the smallpox hit and saw the townsfolk through to the other side. Jimmy shook his head, disbelief coloring every word, “You taught yourself how to shoot like that in a few months?”

Scar leaned close across the table, as if he was about to reveal a big secret. He pitched his voice low, “I’m still better with a bow, if I’m honest,” he admitted. “But I’ve been wanting to ask you to be deputy for ages, now. You don’t think I *wanted* to do all this myself, do you?”

Jimmy shrugged. Scar was not the sort of man who gave up control easily, even to someone he saw as his second in command. “I don’t see you trusting just anyone with the role,” he said carefully.

“Smart man,” Scar admitted, “and exactly my point! I didn’t see a single soul in town that I thought would be good in the post, ‘til saw you looking at these. Something in your eyes told me that you weren’t looking to protect yourself.” he nodded at the guns. Jimmy spun the empty barrel of the one he was holding, just for something to do with his hands. “Was I wrong?”

Jimmy drew back and tried to focus on the smell of gunpowder clinging to his shirt. “No,” he said, voice hoarse.

“I’d been looking for someone who knew what being deputy was about. Not a bid for power, not for personal gain. I think that’s you.”

Jimmy didn’t have an argument for that, and Scar seemed to sense it.

Scar sat back, satisfied. He took another swig of his drink and turned back to the guns. “I’m going a mite easier on you than I did on myself,” he said. “I was out there every night for months, practicing until I couldn’t feel my hands. Until my fingers blistered and bled. You’re learning just fine, take it from me. And I like to think I’m a good judge of character. I think you’d make a mighty fine deputy.”

Scar seemed happy enough to let the silence lapse again, and Jimmy couldn’t figure out what to say to that, or after that, so he didn’t say anything at all. He knew if he could find his voice, he’d accept, and he didn’t know what that would mean for him, for Grian and Pearl, or for the town.

After a while, Scar snapped the chamber closed on the gun.

“Want to help me get supper started?” he asked. Jimmy’s stomach growled in answer for him. Scar grinned and stood. Jimmy followed him to the counter and took the knife offered to him.

~

By the time Pearl and Grian arrived, the house was full of the scent of beef in the cooking pot, and cornbread in the oven. Scar had even managed to get Jimmy out of his own head again. Jimmy, who had turned to the door, beamed at Pearl, who beelined for the kitchen to see what was on. Grian hung back a little. He hung his coat and hat on the hook closest to the door, but when he looked at Scar, who had scooped Jellie away from the hot pan on the countertop, his shoulders softened, even if his face remained as impassable as ever.

“Grian!” Scar called, and Jimmy could *hear* the smile in his voice, “there you are. Hold this for me, will you?” Grian hadn’t made it a half step inside before he had an armful of Jellie, and *there*. There was the smile that Jimmy didn’t see anymore. He watched for it, when he could, and near as he could tell, it only ever came about when Grian was in Scar’s house, the moment he was looking at Scar’s cat. Jimmy never knew what to make of it. He shook his head and turned back to the pan he was watching, just in time to swat Pearl away.

“None of that!”

“Aw, but I’m *famished*, Jim!” Pearl cried, a laugh in her voice. It was so familiar, for a moment, that Jimmy could almost imagine that they’d snuck down to the kitchen back in London.

But the apartment in London didn’t have hand-hewn furniture, or a view out the back window of anything save an alleyway, and Jimmy had never worn boots like these, or had to deal with the grit of sand between his teeth. He’d never cleaned his own gun or tamed his own horse.

Jimmy didn’t know how to feel about any of that. He shoved it all aside, and focused on teasing Pearl and listening in on the strange non-conversation that Grian and Scar were having.

He’d nearly forgotten about the conversation earlier, might have managed to shove it to the back of his mind, where he kept all of his deepest desires, if it weren’t for Scar.

“Conductor off this morning’s train told me that there was a botched robbery on one of the eastward lines a few days ago,” he said. Pearl and Jimmy both perked up at the news. Jimmy was surprised that this hadn’t made the gossip rota Sausage had spun for him. Maybe it had been next on the list after—

Scar glanced over at them. “That done yet?” he asked. Jimmy checked the meat and told him it was. In the hustle to set the table and serve, Jimmy was worried that the topic would get lost, but apparently even Grian was interested. Once they’d settled in to eat, he spoke up, getting Scar back on topic.

“How’d they botch it?” he asked, a light in his eyes showing just how interested he was. Scar lit up at the question. Pearl didn’t notice it, he knew, because she never looked at Grian’s eyes anymore. He didn’t blame her, but he also knew that if *he* started in with that, it would shatter his brother.

“That’s the best part, folks are saying it’s an inside job.” Scar grinned at the three of them. “you’ll never guess who it was,”

Jimmy shook his head, entirely roped into the story.

“The Red Hand Gang?” Pearl guessed. Grian made a noise of protest and Pearl tossed a smirk over her shoulder at him. Instead of trying to remind her that it was no business for a lady to know about the bloody goings-on of the local gangs, Grian sighed and turned back to Scar, whose grin only widened.

“Nice guess, but no cigar.” Scar took a moment to let the curiosity grow, then leaned in. Jimmy found that he was leaning in, too, hanging on his every word. “They’re saying it was the Bettermost Gang.”

“Bullshit,” Jimmy said, on reflex. Scar grinned.

“That’s what they’re telling me.”

“The Bests don’t make mistakes,” Grian put in, clearly too interested now to censor his interest. “Not like that.”

“Unless,” Scar raised an eyebrow, pausing to see if any of them would put in. Pearl inhaled sharply.

“You said the conductors think it was an inside job. You didn’t mean one of the railmen, you meant a member of the *Bests* ruined the job on purpose?”

Scar tapped the side of his nose.

“Rumor has it that they’re down two members, and the other two have to be feeling the heat right about now.”

“You think they’ll come here?” Grian asked, but from his tone, it wasn’t really a question. He must have heard something in Scar’s tone that Jimmy and Pearl had missed.

“I’m prepared for anything. Del Sombra is a railroad town. But I wouldn’t mind having some backup around here.”

Jimmy swallowed roughly, as Scar turned to him. It had been too much to hope that he’d forgotten that he’d asked Jimmy again.

“I don’t know, Scar—” he hedged, trying to make his voice a warning, the way that Grian did sometimes. Anxiety rolled through him, an old friend, and pushed back the part of him that he thought he’d be good at it. That *loved* Del Sombra for taking them in and wanted to protect this little home they’d made.

“What? What are you talking about?” Grian asked, looking between Scar and Jimmy, a dark, familiar fear roiling in his eyes.

“I’ve asked Jimmy to be my deputy.” Scar said, his voice still light, but when he looked at Grian, his eyes flashed like steel. Grian’s lips thinned. “And I figure he can sleep on it, get me *his* decision when y’all come down to Cleo’s next.”

“Our next order is in on Wednesday,” Pearl put in, her voice clear as crystal, showing exactly what side she fell on in this particular conflict. Unfortunately for Jimmy, he was still in uncharted territory. He focused on the plate in front of him, mopping up what was left of the gravy on his plate with the bread Scar had made.

“Wednesday,” Scar mused, sounding pleased with himself. Like he already knew what Jimmy’s answer was going to be. “Well I, for one, can’t *wait*.”

Even sat across the table, Jimmy could hear the way his brother was grinding his teeth. His glare could level cities, in Jimmy’s express opinion, but Scar smiled triumphantly and tucked back into his food.

Later, when Scar and Grian had stepped outside for a smoke, he reached over and poked Pearl in the ribs, like they were still children. Pearl swatted at his hand, a scowl already on her face.

“Why’d you have to go and say that?” Jimmy hissed, “now I’ve got to give him an answer by Wednesday.” Pearl scoffed.

“Sure do,” she said, “and you’d have had to give him one either way.”

“It’s not that easy, Pearl,” Jimmy grumbled, sitting back in his chair. Jellie took the opportunity to hop up into his lap. He felt some of the tension that had been building in his spine melt away as he ran his hand along her soft fur.

“Why not?” Pearl asked, because she couldn’t leave well enough alone. “You want the job, Scar thinks you’d do just fine at it.”

“It’s—” Jimmy sighed, “there’s more to it than that.” Pearl drummed her fingers on the arm of the chair she sat in. There was a hard line to her jaw that told Jimmy that he was about to get her thoughts, whether he liked them or not.

“Would this have something to do with the fact that you haven’t let either Grian or I out of your sight for more than a few minutes since we got off that train?” she asked, her voice as steely as Scar’s had been earlier. Jimmy grimaced. He scooped Jellie up into his arms and buried his face in her fur. “Don’t think we haven’t noticed.”

Of course he didn’t. He knew, for starters, that he wasn’t that subtle. And neither Pearl nor Grian were stupid enough to avoid noticing a pattern like that. But he also hadn’t been able to stop himself. He’d managed to stop waking up in the night to make sure that they were all safe and sound, but he couldn’t keep himself from checking on them during the day. He’d tried his damndest, and he’d managed on more than one occasion to *almost* forget the fear that lived between his ribs, but he couldn’t shake it entirely. He blew out a sigh, earning a chitter from Jellie.

“I’m sorry,” he said, because there wasn’t anything else he *could* say without sounding absolutely mental. He heard the shifting of fabric, and Pearl’s hand on his back was a familiar weight.

“We’re safe here, Jimmy,” she reminded him.

“Grian doesn’t think so, you said it yourself.”

“Grian’s twice as paranoid as you are.” Pearl said, half admonishment, half teasing. Maybe it was her tone, the way her voice wrapped around the words, but in that moment, she reminded him, staggeringly, of Lizzie. Lizzie, far away in England, ensconced in her husband’s country estate by the time the three of them had fled.

“I miss Lizzie,” Jimmy admitted aloud for the first time since this whole debacle had begun. “I can’t help but think that she’d have known what to do.”

“I miss her too,” Pearl’s voice was suddenly smaller than Jimmy remembered it ever being. “But I’m glad she’s not mixed up in all this. I just hope she’s not too worried about us.”

“I’ve been writing her. Not anything about Grian, or the... what happened,” he added quickly, his head shooting up to look at Pearl at last. “Just... what I’d be writing if we were here for normal reasons. I pass them off to the postman when he brings Del Sombra the mail from the dispatcher.”

“Have you heard anything back?” Pearl asked, her eyes bright, hopeful. Jimmy felt bad about the truth, but knew he’d feel worse about lying.

“Nothing yet, but I figured she didn’t have an address to write to. And who knows, maybe she’s mad about how we left. And Grian hasn’t gotten any bad news, either, so that’s got to be a good thing, right?”

“What’s a good thing?” Grian asked, as he and Scar came back inside, carrying the smell of smoke and the cooling air.

“That we haven’t heard anything about Elizabeth,” Pearl said, falling back on propriety the moment it wasn’t just her and Jimmy, the two youngest, missing their eldest sibling. Grian’s

mouth twisted into something sad and complicated. Jimmy, for all he blamed Grian for their current situation, knew that none of them faulted Grian half as much as the man himself. Grian lowered himself onto the ground beside the chair Jimmy occupied, and Jellie, the traitor, jumped from Jimmy's lap to his, winding into his arms and purring louder than an engine car.

"Last I'd heard, her husband had taken ill, but that was in the papers, and it didn't mention a word about Liz." Jimmy would have raised an eyebrow, perhaps teased Grian about the lapse in manners, but something in the lines around Grian's mouth stopped him.

"Hopefully we'll be able to get in touch soon," Jimmy said, the platitude falling from his lips before he could stop it. Grian smiled up at him, a tight, false thing, even more of a lie than the one Jimmy had told earlier.

"Hopefully," he agreed, and silently, they all agreed to let the lies continue to slide.

~

The ride home was slower than the ride in, if only because the dying light as the sun set behind them cast longer shadows here than Jimmy thought he'd ever seen anywhere else. Del Sombra was named for her shadows, and they lived up to all expectations. Night seemed to come earlier and last longer, here, even in the height of summer. They had to take extra care if they were heading home after a certain time, for the sake of the horses.

As they neared the homestead, they passed landmarks that were familiar even in the dark, if not more so than in the light, and Grian pulled up level to Jimmy's horse, letting Pearl ride on ahead.

"Having the barn down by the corral is a good idea," Grian said, shattering the silence that the three of them had cultivated once the shadows had taken more of their concentration than conversation would have allowed for. Jimmy looked at him as best he could in the shifting half-dark. A prickle of suspicion alit at the base of his neck.

"I know," Jimmy allowed. "Functionally, it makes more sense. It's why Mr. Ramos built it over there in the first place."

Grian tapped his fingers on his reins. As Jimmy's eyes adjusted more, he noticed Grian was chewing on his lip, a sure sign that more was coming. And a sure sign that, statistically, Jimmy wouldn't like it. "We can start building tomorrow," Grian offered. Jimmy's hackles, which were already up, rose another inch. "The one I designed isn't reliant on being where I had it. Or, if you like, we can work together on something different—"

Suspicion was a full blown animal in Jimmy's gut, now, squirming to get out. Grian never just rolled over on an argument. And even if Scar had said something to him when Grian inevitably brought up the barn—

"What's this really about?" Jimmy asked. He didn't bother masking his tone to hide how little he currently trusted his brother's words. Grian sighed, a noise that was a little resigned.

Jimmy hated the noise. He knew what it said. *Can't we just have one conversation where we're not at each other's throats?* It asked. *Can't I just have my brother back?*

Unfortunately for Grian, the answer to both, at this junction, was no.

"I can't have just changed my mind on something?"

"No." Jimmy said. He didn't bother elaborating. Grian would either give up the ghost, or would double down, and whenever he brought up what he was really on about, the row would be twice as explosive. They'd done this dance a thousand times since Grian had come downstairs and announced they were going to America, effective immediately, so start packing, Tim.

Grian looked up, toward where the stars were beginning to poke through the softening indigo sky.

"I don't think you should take Scar's offer," he admitted. "You know it's not a good idea to draw any unnecessary attention to ourselves—"

"We're half the world away, Grian." Jimmy snapped, his tone admittedly harsher than he'd intended it to be. "I don't even know what we're running *from*."

"I told you—"

"The less you know the safer you'll be," Jimmy quoted, pitching his voice up to mimic Grian's tone every time he said the words. "That's a load of malarkey and you know it."

"I'm just trying to keep us safe." Grian said, his voice a tether with nearly too much weight on it. That tone hit Jimmy in the chest and made him all the angrier for it.

"Just one question for you, then." He said, fuming at the whole conversation, but especially at the fact that, as far as Grian was concerned, nowhere was, or ever would be safe. "What was the point of stopping *here*? Why did we bother sticking around if we we're just going to be ghosts?"

Grian's face twisted in the shadows, a scowl visible even outside of the patches of dimming sunlight that dotted the landscape. Even over the sounds of the night stirring around them and the horses trotting towards *home*, Jimmy could hear the reins creaking in Grian's grip. The silence stretched between them. As the house came into view, past the horses milling in the yard, Grian spoke again.

"Maybe staying here was a bad idea," he said making sure his voice was too low for Pearl to hear. Jimmy didn't know if he said it because he believed the words, or because he knew it would upset Jimmy. He decided he didn't care.

"Maybe it's too late, now, and you should accept that we're here. We're part of things." Grian didn't respond, and Jimmy didn't let the silence stretch far enough to break the line of conversation. "We might even be safer if I *do* become deputy, did you think about that? At least then we'd have an idea of what goes on around here."

Grian shook his head. He clearly didn't agree, but before he could try and talk Jimmy out of it, or decide that they were leaving after all, Jimmy went on.

"And, y'know, we were all talking about what *Lizzie* might have been able to do if she were with us, but did it ever occur to you that if *I'd* had all the information, I might have been able to help? I could still help!"

"You shouldn't have to." Grian bit out. Jimmy blinked. This was the furthest he'd ever gotten in this line of conversation, and the closest he'd ever gotten to an actual *answer* from his brother. "It's my mistake, you shouldn't have to be involved."

Jimmy couldn't believe his ears. "*I am* involved!" he cried, "like it or not, at this point Pearl and I are *both* involved in whatever the hell you did, and keeping us in the dark isn't doing any of us any favors!"

Grian looked at him, and for the first time in Jimmy's life, he thought Grian was actually seeing him for who he was. The last rays of the sun shone on Grian's face as they crossed onto the property, and for a moment, Jimmy thought that he'd won.

Then, Grian made a small, wounded, frustrated noise in the back of his throat, and rode on ahead. In the span of a moment, he'd caught up to where Pearl was dismounting and waved her inside.

Jimmy slid free of his saddle and led the horses to where they'd set up the makeshift rest area for them, while they worked on the barn.

"Go on—" Grian began, but Jimmy held out his hand for the other brush sitting on the low table behind him.

Neither of them said another word as they dressed down and brushed the horses, and Jimmy let the anger leave him through the soles of his feet, down into the dirt, where he could feel it simmer and join the rest of the emotions that Del Sombra had buried. She took them gladly, her cool shadows tugging at his heels and leaving him exhausted.

As they worked, Jimmy pretended, for a moment, that he wasn't furious with Grian, and that they were here for fun. He imagined that they'd done the unthinkable and let Pearl talk them into bringing her with them on tour, or something equally silly.

He missed having simple problems, like that.

When they were done, Jimmy hefted up both saddles and tack and brought them inside, leaving Grian to lead the horses to the corral. Pearl was nowhere to be seen, but he could hear footsteps on the upper floor, so he assumed she'd already turned in for the night. He followed suit, passing through the kitchen and dining room, before ducking into his room and kicking his door closed just as he heard the first fall of Grian's feet on the outside stairs.

Jimmy had taken one of the two rooms downstairs as his. The rooms upstairs were bigger, but Jimmy was closer to the door here, closer to where he might need to be if danger called.

The day swirled in his mind as he undressed for bed. He washed his hands and face in the washbasin in his room and tugged his boots off his feet. He'd thought he'd need to break them in, but the leather had molded to his feet throughout the day, only getting more comfortable as time passed.

He brushed his fingertips across the delicate stitching that Shelby had insisted on doing for him and let himself finally feel grateful to her for it. It didn't draw attention to him, but it said that he was there, that he was someone who deserved boots like these, that looked nice, even if he wore them until the threads frayed and stained and broke. It was a detail that no one would be drawn to seeing, but was something that someone would appreciate, if they were already looking.

As he sat on the edge of his bed, tracing the stitching of his boots, he felt the decision that he'd already made float back up to the surface of his mind.

He might have changed his mind, or been willing to turn Scar down, if Grian had given him a *reason*. Instead, as sleep took him, Jimmy could practically feel the weight of the deputy's badge on his chest, reassuring him that he might have given up his old life in a mad dash for survival from an enemy he didn't know from Adam, but he still had a place in this world.

And that would have been all well and good, had the sound of a gunshot not shattered his dreams a few hours later.

For a blistering, confusing moment, Jimmy thought he'd been the one to fire the gun, nevermind that he didn't have one at the homestead. He could still feel the burning weight of it in his hand. In the next moment, as consciousness took back over, he was out of bed and moving before he even thought about it. He'd gotten rather good at moving urgently while half asleep, if he did say so himself.

He yanked open his door at the same time Grian darted into the kitchen, and for a brief moment, they simply stared at each other, neither of them fully comprehending what was happening, before it hit Jimmy like a sandbag to the stomach. He could see the cold fear dawn on Grian's face as well.

"Pearl?" Jimmy called, his voice filling the space in the air the gunshot had left behind. Grian, who had seemed to find his feet, if not his voice, dashed back up the stairs toward her room. Jimmy didn't bother waiting. He turned back and yanked his jeans and boots on, and was out the door before Grian, thanks to his longer stride.

"My rifle's gone," Grian told him, from a half step behind. "Someone grabbed it from the kitchen."

Jimmy swore up a storm in his head, and poured on the extra speed, until he reached the open space with the horses. Something was wrong.

"Pearl?" Grian called again. His voice was louder, carried further, and Jimmy figured of the two of them, it would be better to have Grian call out while he scanned the horizon for signs of trouble.

“There!” he gasped, relief dousing his panic as he made out the sight of a figure rushing toward them, lit by the full moon above. He didn’t know how he knew it was Pearl, not at this distance, not in this darkness, but he knew. There was no one chasing her, no one else near that he could see, but—

“Bullseye,” Pearl yelled back, her voice ragged from running.

With that one word, Jimmy realized what was wrong. He waded into the corral, and counted the horses one by one, a hand to their sides to verify who was who. To his growing horror, Jimmy realized that their largest, stubbornest horse was gone.

Pearl drew closer, and Jimmy noticed the rifle cocked over one arm. He swore again.

“Horse thief,” Pearl gasped out as she skidded to a halt in front of them. “I got him. I don’t know if he’s dead—”

He and Grian exchanged a look.

“You’re better with the lasso,” Grian admitted, and Jimmy would have sworn that he only admitted it begrudgingly, had it not been for the slight lilt in his voice that Jimmy could almost convince himself was pride. “You get Bullseye, I’ll check for the thief.”

Jimmy was off before he finished his sentence, looking for Arrow in the gracious light of the full moon. Her coat seemed to glow, and he hauled himself onto her back, not bothering with a saddle. He’d hate himself for it in the morning, but he had bigger problems right now, like finding the erstwhile horse before he jumped the fence, or worse.

He grabbed the rope hung from the fence as he went, and guided Arrow out into the fields. He whistled sharply, something any of the other horses might have come to, if only for the potential promise of food. Bullseye was a different breed. Stubborn to a fault, he refused to let anyone other than Jimmy on his back, and even Jimmy was only given the slightest leeway before Bullseye seemed to get fed up and tossed him aside.

He was grateful for the moonlight as he rode, careful not to go too fast. As much as he didn’t want to lose Bullseye, he wouldn’t risk Arrow to find him. He was also careful to keep an ear out for any noises that were out of the ordinary. If the thief was still alive, he didn’t want the man to get caught beneath Arrow’s hooves.

It was only because he was listening for it that he heard the noise, in the end: a gasp of pain from low on the ground. He reeled Arrow to a halt and turned to where he could see the glow of a lantern in the distance.

“Here!” he called to Grian. Then, “He’s still alive!” The lantern started to swing, and Jimmy guessed that Grian was rushing to them, hopefully with Pearl in tow.

He scanned again for Bullseye but didn’t catch sight of movement on the horizon. He’d been told to look for the horse, but...

He hopped down, waiting a moment for his eyes to adjust again after staring out into the distance for so long. Shadows danced in his periphery, but after a moment, one of them moved again. Jimmy shuffled forward on his knees and reached out towards the prone figure.

When he got close, he was able to make out the figure of a man on the ground, light hair absorbed the moonlight and seemed to shine it back at Jimmy. He couldn't make out any features, but when he reached out to check the man for injuries, the man's eyes snapped open, briefly, and in the light of the moon, Jimmy would have sworn he saw those eyes flash red at him.

Then Grian was behind him, and Jimmy realized it must have been a trick of the lantern.

"Christ," Jimmy swore as he got a better look at the situation. Crimson stained the man's skin, bubbling up from what Jimmy could only *just* see as a gash on the man's neck, where the bullet must have hit him. It had missed his artery by the barest centimeter, Jimmy reasoned. It was the only way that the man could have still been alive when Jimmy found him.

Jimmy didn't have his handkerchief on him, and he guessed that Grian and Pearl were similarly unprepared, so he did the only thing he could think of. He tugged his undershirt off and bit at one edge, tearing it into strips to help staunch the wound. He reached for the man and behind him, Grian made a noise of horror.

Grian set the lantern down. He reached for Jimmy's hands, and with an almost manic tinge to his voice said, "Go on. I've got him."

"Where's Pearl?" Jimmy demanded, not letting Grian move him. He didn't dare risk moving until Pearl got there. He could feel the warmth of the man's life leeching from the wound in his neck, bubbling up between his fingers. Grian shot him a look that told him that he knew why Jimmy was asking and didn't approve in the slightest.

"Here," Pearl said, though her voice sounded small, breathless. Jimmy could hear the *shff-shff* of her skirts against the grass before she dropped down to the ground on the man's other side, already reaching out towards him.

"Pearl—" Grian began, his voice that clear warning that Jimmy had tried to emulate in Scar's kitchen only a few hours ago.

"He's a thief, Grian, that shouldn't be a death sentence," she hissed. Even with the glare of the lantern, Jimmy saw Grian flinch at her words.

She reached out and placed a hand on the man's forehead. In the flickering light, the man looked pale, gaunt. If Jimmy didn't know better, he'd have said he could see his bones through his skin, but he knew that was the adrenaline and exhaustion talking.

Beneath Jimmy's hands, the bleeding slowed, but didn't stop.

"Fuck," Pearl swore, shaking out her hand as if it stung. She didn't bother acknowledging the look Grian sent her way. "I can't..." she trailed off, looking at the man on the ground. "I must

have done too much earlier,” she admitted. “I’ve never tried to do so much in one day.”

Grian finally succeeded in shoving Jimmy aside. He grabbed the makeshift bandages and smiled over at Pearl, “you did brilliantly, Pearlo,” he said gently, “first aid can do the rest. We’ll take him into town to the doctor, and then drop him off with the sheriff.” He glanced up at Pearl, took in her expression, and met her eyes properly in the glow of the lantern. For once, Pearl didn’t look away. “It’ll be alright,” he promised. The words sounded strange coming from the world’s most natural catastrophizer, Jimmy thought, but the uncharacteristic optimism was nice.

Pearl still looked shaken. Jimmy reached over and helped her back into a standing position. “C’mon you. At this point, Bullseye’s probably found a nice spot away from all the chaos to lounge in. I’ll find him when the sun comes up,” he promised as he led her over to Arrow. He hooked his hands together in a makeshift stirrup and helped to hoist her onto Arrow’s back. “Be right back,” he tossed over his shoulder to Grian, as he led Arrow with a hand on her neck back toward the shape on the horizon that promised *home* and, for Pearl, a warm bed.

Once he’d dropped Pearl off, he hitched Arrow to the cart and carefully led her back over to the spot where he’d left Grian. By the time he reached his brother, the lantern was guttering, but the sun was beginning to rise. The remnants of Jimmy’s shirt were tied around the thief’s neck, but luckily, it appeared that the bleeding had stopped.

As the sun rose and they worked to lift him carefully into the cart, Jimmy couldn’t help but notice that the thief was well dressed. His clothes were a bit worn, but the quality of the work was present. The red dye in his shirt was faded, and the wear on his trousers spoke to frequent use, but there were no frayed stitches, no holes or noticeable patches as far as Jimmy could see. And the man’s boots, black dyed leather, spoke volumes. He was built solidly, too. Jimmy had a feeling that, were he awake, he could probably put up a hell of a fight.

And as for the holsters on his hips, they hung snugly around his waist, even as Grian and Jimmy carried him. He wore two gun belts, one of which was empty, but the holsters on the other each had a handle in them. They looked nothing like the hilt of any gun Jimmy had ever seen, but he hadn’t seen *everything*.

He wanted to reach for them, see what it was that the man cared enough to carry, but not enough to care for, but that felt like an invasion of privacy. Grian would have called that stupid, but, Jimmy reasoned, he wasn’t Grian.

He left Grian to tie a tarp down over the top of the cart, to help keep the man from boiling in the sun as they made their way into town and made good on his promise to Pearl.

Arrow must have been exhausted, but she showed no sign of it as Jimmy swung back up onto her saddle and steered her out in the direction the thief had been going.

He spotted Bullseye about a hundred yards from the house, near the edge of the property, as if he’d gone to leave, but decided against it. He and Bullseye seemed to stare at each other for a minute. Bullseye flicked his tail lazily, and Jimmy saw his body language change. He slid the rope free of his arm and tightened his grip on the horse with his thighs.

The whistle of the lasso hoop cutting through the air was the only thing Jimmy could hear as he stared Bullseye down. In a split second, he knew, Bullseye might decide to bolt, and Jimmy would have to fix his seat and give chase.

Jimmy only needed a few seconds to get up to speed with the rope, and it seemed that Bullseye knew that, too.

His ears flattened, he snorted, and he booked it, rushing past Jimmy.

Jimmy swore up a storm and gave chase.

He'd never admit to it, of course, but this was a part of living like this that he loved. Sure, he might not enjoy how they'd gotten here, and he might not know what was going on half the time, whether it was with Pearl and her new abilities, or Grian and his secrets, but he did know this: he knew horses, and he knew he loved the feeling of the wind on his skin, and the beating of his heart in his chest as he rode.

He kept the rope spinning as he gained on Bullseye, and between one blink and the next, he saw his opening, and he'd thrown the hoop.

For a moment, he was sure he wouldn't make it, that it would miss by centimeters, but it didn't.

He held tight to the rope and grinned at the almost indignant whinny he got from Bullseye.

Begrudgingly, Bullseye let himself be led back to where the rest of the horses milled about, doing whatever it was that horses do all day.

Jimmy couldn't beat back the glow of pride that he'd not only gotten both horses back uninjured, but that Bullseye hadn't even put up half of his usual fuss once Jimmy had him roped.

He passed the cart as he went past and noticed that neither Pearl nor Grian were there. The tarp was folded up on one corner, and Jimmy steered both horses over to fix it.

He startled as he did so, and quickly blinked the sun out of his eyes. The thief lay in the back of the cart, still as stone, as he'd been doing since Jimmy and Grian had lifted him into the back. In the sunshine, the man didn't look half as gaunt as Jimmy had thought last night. His skin looked pale from blood loss, and his cheekbones were still sharp, but he was nowhere near as skeletal as the lantern's shadows had made him look the night before. His mouth was parted slightly, though Jimmy couldn't really hear him breathing. Just to make sure, he reached out and placed a hand on the man's chest. When he breathed again, Jimmy felt himself sag in relief. He knew no one would have faulted Pearl for killing an intruder, let alone a thief, but Pearl would have. Jimmy was sure she'd been shooting to wound, but hitting a moving target in the dark was hard enough. *Aiming* the shot was something else entirely.

Something, maybe remorse, maybe pity, tugged at him as he looked at the injured man. Jimmy hopped out of his saddle and grabbed the blanket off the back of the cart. He shook it

out, to get rid of any splinters, hay, or anything else it may have gathered between trips, and folded it back up. Carefully, he lifted the man's head and slid the blanket underneath as a makeshift pillow. As he settled the man back, he studied his face for any changes, but his eyes remained closed, long lashes casting shadows across his cheeks. Jimmy shook his head, feeling a bit silly.

Jimmy left the tarp as it was, just in case, as he finally got Bullseye and his borrowed horse back to the corral. He gave them a cursory brush-down before he darted back inside to change. He passed Grian on the way in and paused. He nearly said something but stopped himself. The man was still unconscious, had stayed unconscious the entire time Jimmy was out there.

And yet, Jimmy would have sworn that when he first leaned over the side of the cart, the thief's eyes were open.

Crossroads Town

Chapter Summary

When Scar wakes to hear that Pearl has shot a man, it's only a matter of time before the web around the Ratcliffes starts to fray at the edges. If he tugs at the thread he reveals, will the secrets Grian has been hiding finally come to light, or will everything that holds Del Sombra together come crashing down around his ears?

Chapter Notes

Woohoo! Here's chapter two!! :D Scar POV inbound!

It's no 20k intro to the setting, but I hope you enjoy all the same! (Most of the chapters from here on out are about this length, give or take.)

Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

One Year Earlier

The train had been running for a few months now, often enough that the townsfolk were used to the noise of it now, if not the slowly increasing influx of people as they made their way further west, or back east to visit family, or vice versa.

Scar, for his part, didn't normally greet the passengers as they got off the train. He'd done so the first time, both to be personable and thank the conductor himself, and to greet the representatives from the Union Pacific who had ridden along to ensure that their investments were sound.

Even with the folks already on the train, few enough folk were coming in, as of yet, and fewer still were staying. They'd had some people off the last train who had heard that there was help to be had with the mine, and a few on the one before that who were getting in ahead of the boom that would surely come when word spread that the pox had been contained and stopped. Scott had come in on that one, and convinced their new General Store manager, Cleo, to stick around too.

Scar had been suspicious of Scott, at first, wondering what such a well-dressed man might be running from to stop in the middle of nowhere, but kept his mouth shut when he set up shop in the tailor's. And, well, he couldn't say *much*, now could he? They needed the draw of commerce, and the people still in town needed clothes.

Plus, with him came Cleo. Scar *did* like Cleo. From the moment they'd met, something about her had spoken to him. Put him on edge, the way that most law-abiding citizens did, but he was sheriff! He had nothing left to worry about, on that front.

Another reason not to get too near the tracks, given the itch in his heels that told him to run before anyone sussed him out. He wanted to pack up his wagon, pick up his horse from poor Señora Ramos down the road, and be off onto his next... ahem, *adventure*. It wasn't good for a man who made his living selling snake oil to stay in the same place the snakes had got loose, but it was far, far too late for that, now.

A sharp whistle broke Scar from his thoughts, and he swallowed sharply. The card in his pocket seemed to burn. He didn't pull it out, didn't look at it, didn't even press against his pocket with his hand, lest anyone watching get the wrong idea. But he could see it in his mind without blinking.

The Tower, reversed. The focus of the painting on the card was of a woman, but what had caught Scar's eye this time around was not the impressive amount of jewelry she wore, but the landscape out of one of the four windows, revealing not rolling hills and well-worn roads, but a heart with wings, impaled upon twin swords. The diptychs didn't show up often, but when they did, it was a sign for Scar to be extra observant.

Scar plastered a smile on his face as the attendant rushed to open the carriage door. He waited for a heart-stopping minute, casting his eyes over the train, wondering if he was wrong, if he'd misunderstood the cards for the first time in his life, when there was movement on the other side of the doorway.

A young woman appeared at the door. She looked to have a solid build, if slightly thin, as though getting over a recent illness. Her dark hair was dull from traveling but was coiled expertly atop her head and held in place with a single silver pin. As she stepped forward, Scar noticed that her face was momentarily stony before she smiled down at the train attendant and accepted a hand down onto the platform. She turned and took a decent sized carpet bag from the man behind her.

He was far taller than she was, with broad shoulders that he looked like he hadn't quite grown into. A dark wool coat hid most of his stature, but Scar had a feeling that he wasn't the sort of man to be trifled with. He had blond hair that was a bit longer than Scar wagered he usually wore it and a face that looked like it was predisposed to smiling. He wasn't smiling as he stepped down onto the platform. Scar noticed that he reached out to take her bag with an air of familiarity in the gesture, like he had done so a thousand times before and it was muscle memory at this point. The woman kept custody of her bag, pointedly shifting it away from his free hand. The man rolled his eyes, but there was more fondness in the gesture than annoyance. Nevertheless, he stuck close to the woman, one hand empty, as if to either take her bag when she inevitably tired, or catch her if she were to fall.

They both moved off to the side, eyes searching the platform, and Scar could feel the moment they saw him. He adjusted his new cane, the handle still unfamiliar to him, and tried to stand taller, tried to look the part of sheriff as the third and final passenger disembarked.

He was shorter than the man who had exited prior, with hair the color of wet sand, and a much less abused coat on over his sensible travel wear. If this man had ever smiled, it had been a long time ago. He had the mouth for it, but his eyebrows were drawn heavily over his dark eyes as they swept over the platform. He held himself differently from the other two. Where they were clearly on edge, they didn't appear to be expecting any sort of *trouble*. This third man held himself like he knew that trouble had beat him here and was expecting resistance simply by disembarking the train. With a jolt, Scar realized that he knew that look. It was the look of a man gauging his possibilities for survival. Scar watched him scan the area for threats and land squarely on him.

His feet hit the platform without missing a beat, the soles of his shoes settling on the wooden platform like he'd visited Del Sombre a thousand times and knew exactly where to step.

The man's black eyes never left his as he stepped down from the train and he straightened. His shoulders were confident, but his posture reminded Scar more of a rattlesnake poised to strike at the man foolish enough to come close. Scar felt his smile slip into something a little more genuine. Even if he hadn't been sure that his cards were guiding him towards these three, those eyes alone would have convinced him.

He stepped forward, sure to exaggerate his limp, just in case. Something told him that this man didn't buy it, even as his eyes flicked down to the silver-topped cane. "Well, hello there!" Scar said as he came closer. "Welcome to Del Sombra. I'm the sheriff around these parts," he tapped his badge. This close, he noticed the moment that the man realized every movement Scar made was deliberate, performative. It should probably have irritated him, to be mistrusted like this without cause, but for some reason, Scar found that he was delighted.

"Afternoon, Sheriff," the taller man said, reaching out a hand. He had a lilt to his voice, an accent that Scar recognized as English, and with the trappings of the upper-crust at that. Scar turned his attention to him and shook his hand. "I'm James Ratcliffe, and this is my sister, Pearl." Scar noticed that he didn't introduce the third man, and he watched from the corner of his eye as the third man noticed him noticing.

Interesting.

"Has something happened, Sheriff?" Pearl asked, as Scar reached for her hand as well. A similar accent, though hers seemed to lilt differently. Scar filed that away for later.

"No ma'am," Scar answered with a chuckle. "I can promise you that all is well here. Better than well, even! Del Sombra has been booming lately." It was a *slight* exaggeration, but only compared to, say, any other town.

"We don't normally get met at the platform by those in charge."

Ah, and there was the mysterious third. Scar turned back to him with an eyebrow raised, half a challenge. Slowly, deliberately, he held out his hand. The man watched him, as if expecting to find that Scar was hiding a knife up his sleeve.

"Well then, Mr.—" Scar trailed off, allowing him to give the introduction James hadn't.

“... Ratcliffe,” the third Ratcliffe answered as he raised his hand to take Scar’s own. He hesitated, as if he knew that there was a possibility that doing so would spell his ruin.

“Mr. Ratcliffe, it must be our lucky day.”

~

Now

The sun’s rays had barely grazed Scar’s windowpane when he heard a hammering at the door.

His feet hit the floor even as the song that haunted his dreams had yet to fade completely from his mind. He was reaching for a bag that didn’t exist anymore before his mind registered where he was—familiar wood grain beneath his bare feet, a grumpy Jellie meowing at him for being awoken so abruptly. As he stood, ignoring the twinge in his leg at being so abruptly awoken, the sheriff of Del Sombra met his eyes in the mirror hanging on the wall. The song faded, as always, into the rush of the river behind his home, and the laughter of birds beyond his window. The comfort of one bled into the comfort of another.

He took a brief pause to allow his brain to recontextualize the knock. It wasn’t a sign of danger, wasn’t the death-knell of another name, he didn’t need to climb out the back window before they thought to try and break the door down. This was Del Sombra. He was the highest point of the law here, and if someone was coming to him now, it was because they needed his *help*, not his head.

He threw on a pair of trousers and barely had the suspenders in place before he opened the door. Or, he *would* have, had his early-morning visitor not decided that they’d done enough waiting. He was halfway across the floor of his main room when the door was thrown open and Grian half-ran, half-stumbled in. He was gripping the doorknob hard enough that Scar was sure it would snap clean out of the wood. His other hand was braced against the doorjamb, as if he had been expecting more resistance from the door. As Scar watched, Grian’s fingers curled around the lip of the wood, but even that wasn’t enough to stop them trembling.

“What happened?” Scar demanded, a little surprised at himself when his voice came out sharp. He could feel anger, hot and unpleasant, simmering just below his ribs. “Are you all —”

Grian flinched and released his poor doorknob to shove a hand through his hair. The anger flared. No one was supposed to touch the Ratcliffes. They were supposed to be *safe*.

It was what Scar had promised, all those months ago.

“Pearl shot a man,” Grian said, his voice like glass, ready to splinter at the slightest provocation. Scar felt his stiff limbs loosen. It struck him, suddenly, the realization that it wasn’t *anger* he was feeling. Not really. The heat of anger was there, distracting Scar from the reality that he had seen Grian in his doorway and had been abruptly *terrified*. Grian

dragged in a ragged breath. Scar wondered if he'd ran the whole way here. "Last night. He was—when I heard the gunshot—" he cut himself off and leaned heavily against the doorjamb, scrubbing across his face with his hands. Scar could see now that the scrapes didn't just cover his knuckles. The backs of his hands, too, were covered in small abrasions. Unable to stop himself, Scar tugged at one of Grian's hands, tracing the raised lines and irritated skin.

"What happened to your hands?"

Grian looked a little nonplussed, as though he hadn't realized the shape he was in. Or, more likely, hadn't thought it was worth noticing. "I had to get the blood off."

It was then that the rest of Grian's words registered in Scar's half-asleep mind. He stamped down a wave of fresh panic and forced himself to remain calm.

Gently, Scar wrapped his fingers around Grian's wrist, where he could feel his pulse thrumming softly against the pads of his fingertips and forced his mind back to the real problem at hand. He took in a shaking breath, and then another, reminding himself that if Grian was *here*, then Grian was *fine*. That if Grian was fine, and the man Pearl shot had been stabilized and was alive, then it stood to reason that Jimmy and Pearl were also safe.

They're residents, he reminded himself, *of course they're safe*.

"Pearl shot someone?" he asked, forcing his mind back to the problem at hand. He knew Pearl. Perhaps not as well as he knew Grian, but he knew her all the same. She might shoot someone without hesitation, but she'd have to have a damn good reason for it first.

Scar watched Grian's face carefully, and if he hadn't been sure before, he could tell now that something was *off* with the man in front of him. His face spasmed, and his eyes went wide, pupils suddenly contracting again until they were barely pinpricks. It was hard enough to tell Grian's irises from his pupils as it was, but now it was bordering on impossible.

"We stabilized him. He's alive," Grian said quickly, as if Scar would have ever considered prosecuting her, "We took him to Doc Fan, and I came straight here."

"Good," Scar said, trying to put all of the pieces into a picture that made sense. He tried to tell himself that he would have been this worried about any of the other citizens of Del Sombra, but looking at Grian's face, he couldn't quite lie to himself that easily. "If he's with Cub, we have a minute, then."

He tugged Grian inside with the grip he still had on his wrist. Part of him wondered what it said about Grian's current state that he hadn't even bothered trying to shake Scar off. He didn't bother shutting the door, the dirt would come in all the same. He had to beat the rugs out soon enough as it was, and right now, his focus was on steering Grian into the chair nearest the window, where the sunlight was beginning to settle. Jellie had already claimed the chair, but she didn't protest (much) when Scar scooped her up and deposited her in Grian's lap.

“Coffee?” he asked but didn’t wait for an answer. The circles under Grian’s eyes were nearly as large as Scar’s old go-bag had been, and if Scar had to guess, he’d say that Grian had been up most of the night because of the intruder.

He used the head of his cane to tug another chair over to where Grian sat leaning his forehead on his hand, and then set about making coffee for them both. Grian wouldn’t drink it, he already knew, but Scar knew he liked the smell, liked the feeling of the warm mug in his hands. It was the reason Scar always made enough for two.

When he was finished, he hooked his cane over the back of the chair and handed one of the mugs to Grian before settling into his own seat. He swallowed a scalding mouthful, to help wake himself up the rest of the way and leaned forward to catch Grian’s attention.

“Tell me what happened,” Scar prompted.

Instead of answering, Grian took the one, polite sip of the coffee that Scar knew he was going to take, and then turned *all* of his attention to Scar.

He’d wanted it a moment ago, and he wanted it still, but it never failed to amaze Scar that the weight of Grian’s full attention prickled at him differently than anyone else’s did.

“Why do I trust you?” he asked, his voice ragged. He sounded as though, the entire time Scar had been making coffee, he’d been screaming at the top of his lungs. “Why is it so easy to trust you?”

A normal man might have taken offense to that. A worse conman than Scar had ever been *would* have taken offense to that, if only out of fear that he was being seen through.

“I’m sure you didn’t do it on purpose,” Scar said, lightly. Grian laughed, a small, helpless noise.

“No,” he admitted. Then, “sorry.”

Scar leaned down and placed his mug on the floor beside his chair, where it would inevitably be knocked over by either himself or by Jellie, and either way would end up with a healthy helping of dust and cat hair in it.

When his fingers brushed Grian’s cheek, Grian closed his eyes and leaned into the touch. His brows furrowed, as if it pained him to do it, but he couldn’t stop himself. Scar’s fingers bumped the frame of Grian’s glasses, knocking them slightly askew, but neither of them moved to fix them.

“When I heard the gun go off, I thought it was over. I thought that he’d finally caught us, he’d finished the job with Pearl, and would be coming for me, next.”

Realization dawned on Scar, and suddenly Grian’s question made sense.

“That friend of yours, you mean?”

Grian nodded, and in the movement Scar could feel a spot on his cheek that he'd missed while shaving. He was suddenly, violently glad of it. Of every little sign that Grian was alive and in this room.

"And the worst of it is..." Grian inhaled, shakily, as if the words were tumbling out of his control. He opened his eyes and raised his hand to cover Scar's. His palm was warm from the heat of the coffee, and Scar could still feel the ragged bits of skin where he'd scrubbed too hard to get the blood off of his fingers, "All I could think was that I wished I hadn't left you thinking I was angry with you."

Scar's breath shuddered in his chest. Suddenly, it was too much, looking into Grian's eyes. He twisted his hand so that he was holding Grian's and pulled it down into his lap, so he could stare at Grian's palm. If he sat like this, he reasoned, he could pretend that they were still getting to know each other, and Scar was pretending to read Grian's future.

"You," Scar began as he cradled Mr. Ratcliffe's hand in both of his. He could see in Ratcliffe's face that he didn't believe any of what Scar was saying, which was fine by him, especially given the wide grin the man was failing to hide behind his other hand, "will be very lucky in love."

"Oh, will I?"

"Mhmm. I count no less than three illegitimate children on these lines, here."

"I'm not so sure I'd call that lucky—" Ratcliffe began, laughing even as Scar cut him off.

"Mr. Ratcliffe, are you doubting my craft?" Scar demanded. He was sure that Ratcliffe would, as he had time and again already, demand to know why a sheriff considered such strange pursuits his 'craft.'

"Grian." Ratcliffe said, instead. The grin on his face hadn't faded, but he'd stopped hiding it, choosing instead to prop his chin on his hand as he leaned on the table between them. "Call me Grian. You might as well, it's not as if anyone here would mind."

"Well," Scar had said, feeling a bit as though he'd had the wind knocked out of his chest, and he didn't know why. "If your name is Grian then this means something different entirely."

"Tell me," Grian asked, and so Scar bent back over his hand and tried to make his mind outpace his heart.

"I knew you weren't," Scar said softly, once he was sure his voice wouldn't shake.

"Scar, something..." he trailed off, "I feel like something bad is going to happen."

"To you?"

Grian scoffed, and Scar could almost feel what it was he was going to say before he said it. "If it were going to happen to me, I wouldn't be worried."

Scar wasn't sure if it was arrogance or something else that had Grian so sure of his survival or so uncaring of it. Both options irritated him. He raised an eyebrow at Grian, who had the decency to look a little sheepish.

"Let me try that again?"

"Please do."

"I have a hand in what happens to me. I can't control what happens to anyone else here."

You can't, Scar didn't say, I can.

"And that scares you," Scar said instead, reading between the lines to find what really had Grian spooked.

"Of course it does!" Grian looked at Scar like he'd grown two heads and one of them was created specifically for the purpose of pissing him off. "And you know why." Grian closed his eyes and raised the mug to his forehead. Scar wanted to reach out again, but he stopped himself. He tried to content himself with the fact that Grian had yet to pull his hand back.

"You're safe here," Scar said trying to convey in his words what he couldn't in his actions.

"So you keep telling me," Grian sighed, muffled against his mug. "And I keep believing you." Grian rotated the hand Scar was holding, so his palm pressed against Scar's, forsaking plausible deniability. He peered out from behind the mug. Scar could see that his eyes were nearly back to normal. His pulse, too, wasn't half as fast as it had been.

"Cub should have something for you for that headache," Scar said, before either of them could say anything else.

I need to know they're safe before I can think about anything else. Grian's voice echoed in his mind, the choked words from months ago. Scar had taken those words to heart, in more ways than one. He respected the boundary, no matter how much it hurt, but the underlying promise was something he had coiled up and settled in his chest, where it would be safe.

That didn't stop him from wanting.

Grian nodded and slid his hand free of Scar's as he stood, so that he could properly deposit Jellie back on her chosen throne.

"Let me finish getting dressed, and you can tell me all about your clandestine visitor on the way," Scar said.

He took a moment to compose himself behind the closed door, to remind himself who he was and where he stood, and then went back to where Grian was waiting for him.

~

When Scar first caught a glimpse of the bandit through the window outside of Cub's little hospital, he thought that he might have stopped breathing. The man was clearly feigning

sleep, and likely had been for some time. His neck was bandaged and his hair still had blood in it, but that wasn't what brought Scar pause.

"Hold on," Scar said, flicking his cane out to a half inch ahead of where it would have smacked Grian in the shins. "I need to get something from the office. Wait for me outside, will you?"

"Do I have a choice?" Grian asked, and though his words were petulant, Scar could hear faint amusement hidden in them.

"Everyone has a choice, Grian!" Scar called over his shoulder, but he could hear that the words sounded distracted. To be fair to those poor words, he *was* distracted. His leg twinged as he climbed the stairs, protesting the sharp movements he'd already performed today, as well as the lack of care taken with his usual routine. He ignored it, knowing full well that it would simply get worse as the day went on.

He went straight to his desk, his fingers already seeking for what he knew he'd find in the top drawer. Two nearly identical pieces of paper, one very new, but one far, far older, found while Scar had been clearing out the desk from what looked like the contents of at least two previous sheriffs. If he'd had a worse eye, he would have missed it, but he didn't, and he didn't.

He took a moment to stare at the posters, letting his smile widen in the privacy of the sheriff's office in a way he would never allow the townsfolk to see. This was not a benevolent smile he could feel that in the way it curled at the edges. He'd never seen the smile on himself before, but when he caught sight of his reflection in one of the many mirrors he'd placed in his office (all angled specifically to give him the ability to see whatever he might need to from desk he was often trapped behind), he could see exactly who he'd learned it from.

He folded the posters up and put them in the left breast pocket of his duster for safe keeping. He re-seated his cane under him and paused.

He had a hunch, of course he did, and atop all of that, he was a sucker for showmanship.

He picked his cane back up and rolled it in his hands thoughtfully. The warm brown wood and silver handle matched his town, exactly the way he wanted it to, but that wasn't what he needed right now.

A minute later, the smile was back under control, and Scar walked out of the sheriff's office, his cane shining white as the morning sun kissed the dirt beneath his shoes. The breeze whistling through the canyon put an extra pep in his step, the jaunty tune of nature seeming to match his own mood.

Days like this, he thought Del Sombra had a soul of her own, and was happy to see her people happy.

He raised a hand to wave at Pearl as she ducked out of the Sanctuary Saloon, but she didn't seem to see him, ducking her head the moment she was through the doors and dashing off into town, something clutched in her arms.

Curious.

Scar filed that question away for later, squared his shoulders, doing his best to look every inch the imposing sheriff of Del Sombra, and went back to where Grian stood waiting. He hadn't bothered moving to the shade, seeming to simply trust that Scar wouldn't take too long. He turned to Scar with a raised eyebrow, and Scar, to his credit, did not get lost in examining the new freckles he could see dusting Grian's cheeks, now that Grian didn't look deathly afraid. Grian fell into step beside him easily.

"Weren't you using a different cane a moment ago?"

"Yep," Scar said, swinging the white cane for emphasis as he hopped up the stairs. Grian rolled his eyes, but held the door open for Scar to enter first. Grian didn't need to know that this one hadn't just been in the office, left there from yesterday after a long day of sheriffin' around.

Grian, to his credit, dropped the subject. There was still a line of anxiety in his shoulders, and it only grew more apparent as they drew closer to the doctor's office.

Scar, well acquainted with Grian's moods, gestured for Grian to precede him inside of the building. Grian straightened his spine, tilting his chin up slightly, the way he did when he was trying to put on a solid front.

Scar tried not to let Grian's clear anxiety infect him. *Scar* knew that Pearl wouldn't be prosecuted for protecting her home and their livelihood, after all.

Cub was waiting outside the door where he kept his patients, rummaging through his little wooden box of miracles.

Cub had been a rail surgeon, once upon a time, and he still carried with him several of those practices, one of which was to ensure that he had one of Johnson's emergency cases on him at all times. He'd passed one of these off to Scar (rather violently, for a medical man, if Scar did say so himself. If he'd had poorer reflexes, he might not have ducked in time), and the wooden box had stayed in Scar's kitchen since. Scar didn't use it. He didn't need to.

"Good morning Cub!" Scar called, loud enough that he hoped that the "unconscious" man in the next room would hear him. Cub glanced up, clearly irritated at his volume. "How's our horse thief?"

Cub glanced toward the door, as if expecting their patient to pop his head out through the doorway, and then, Scar noted with no small amount of interest, past Scar to Grian. Grian stiffened at his side.

Interesting.

After an age, Cub looked back at Scar and straightened.

"He's lucky. Between where the shot landed and... whatever they did to stabilize him, he's healing well. *Remarkably* well." The last words were flung, pointedly, at Grian again. If Scar

were a betting man, he'd say that Cub's words were an accusation. Scar glanced to his side, and saw that Grian was standing stock-still, refusing to break eye contact with Cub. A flicker of movement between them caught Scar's eye, and he glanced down, watching as Grian's right hand twitched toward his belt and away again.

Interesting.

Never, in the year-odd they'd been here, had Scar seen Grian with a weapon. He didn't use a gun, had refused when Scar had offered to teach him. The most Grian would do was handle a knife in the kitchen. He supposed it made sense, given what little Grian had told him, but Scar was *fascinated* by the fact that this was a situation where Grian felt the need to defend himself.

"Glad to hear it," he said, shattering whatever strange tension had been in the air. "Is my deputy in with him?" he asked, just to turn Grian's glare away from Cub, and onto him.

Cub, who never missed a beat, responded before Grian had a chance to. "Been watching the man like a hawk," Cub pitched his voice low, "Must be real sick of watching him pretend to sleep, by now."

"What?!" Grian hissed, "He's awake?"

"He was awake when you brought him in. No man sleeps that stiff."

Grian swore, then swore again, tugging his hands through his hair. "How did I miss that?" he asked, mostly to himself. Scar patted him on the shoulder.

"Don't worry about it too much," Scar told him absently, already turning his attention to the task at hand, "Cub, I'll need a few minutes with him. I've got some questions that I think he can answer for me."

"Fine by me, Jimmy's the only one in there, and it sounds like he's doing it on an official capacity."

Scar made a thoughtful noise, remembering Pearl's flight from the Saloon, and turned to Grian. "Why isn't Pearl with him? I'm surprised you were willing to let her out of your sight."

"She was in a bit of a state earlier," Grian said, "I figured it would be best if she didn't stay here and worry herself sick." Scar couldn't know for sure, but the words didn't sit right with him. It didn't help that Grian was looking at Cub again, not at him. Scar felt what he was sure was a lie settle like a stone in his gut.

"Well then," Scar said, knowing that he would worry about it later, so long as Grian was there to pester once he got done with his job. He looked at Grian, silently pleading with Grian, but Grian didn't look back. He sighed through his nose and pulled off his hat as he opened the door. "Back in a minute."

By the time he was through the door, he had the worry locked behind a door in his mind and a full smile back on his face. It was harder to do than he remembered.

Jimmy looked up as he came through the door, halfway out of his seat in that funny English way of theirs. Scar waved him back into his seat.

“Morning Sheriff,” Jimmy said, already a ball of nervous energy this morning. From the story Grian had told, Jimmy had been up the same as the rest of them, but he didn’t carry the same exhaustion Grian did.

“Morning Deputy,” Scar greeted. Jimmy rubbed the back of his neck, a small, pleased smile on his face. Jimmy didn’t bother correcting him, and Scar felt his smile widen without his say-so.

“He hasn’t moved,” Jimmy said, nodding to the man on the cot. Scar nudged aside the bandages wrapped around the man’s neck and inhaled sharply.

He glanced over at Jimmy.

Jimmy stared at the man’s torso, seemingly riveted by the way his breathing made his chest rise and fall. His face was partially obscured by the angle, but he glanced up once, met Scar’s eyes, and looked away again.

The solid door between them was all that kept Scar from straining to see if the same guilty expression was on Grian’s face.

The wound, inflicted *hours* prior, based on the story he’d been told, looked as though it had been on the mend for weeks.

Remarkably well, Cub had said. That didn’t even begin to cover it. No wonder the bastard was wide awake, he was barely even hurt.

Scar took a shaking breath and reminded him that he had a job to do, that he had to focus on the task at hand, instead of going out to catch Grian and demand an explanation. There were a few distinct possibilities here, and Scar didn’t like any of them. He glanced back down at the man on the cot and eyed him again, looking for something he knew that Jimmy wouldn’t have been able to catch. He felt his twisting nerves calm a little when he found what he was looking for. He settled the bandages back over the wound and leaned down so that when he spoke, only the bandit in the hospital bed would hear him.

“Rise and shine, Mr. Hagan,” Scar called the words a soft song in the man’s ear. When Scar leaned back again, he was delighted to find that the man’s eyes were wide open, staring at him in mounting terror. “Though I *highly* doubt that was ever your real name. No, it sounds more like something a cornered man gives to his jailer right before his associates break him out.” The man was sitting up, his back straight as a signpost, red eyes darting between Scar and Jimmy. Scar knew what he saw: sheriff and deputy, on either side of the room. One blocking the door, though Jimmy didn’t realize that was what he was doing, the other blocking the only window in the room, and Scar *did* know that was what he was doing. No way out. No escape. Scar smiled, and he knew from experience it wasn’t a nice smile to be on

the receiving end of. “The old ‘false name on the wanted poster’ trick,” he continued brightly, winking over at Jimmy as he said, “we’ve all done it.”

“Don’t know any Hagan,” the man rasped at last. “My name’s—”

“Tango?” Scar guessed. He pulled the papers out of his breast pocket and pretended to examine them. He turned around the fresher looking paper. The ink had barely dried on it when Scar took over the office. “That is what it says here: Wanted, alive, for crimes of larceny, destruction of property, and conspiring with known felons. Goes by the name of ‘Tango.’”

Tango was frozen in the cot, his eyes on Scar’s hands, exactly what Scar wanted. Scar folded the wanted posters back up and reached for where he’d leaned his cane against the wall.

He saw the moment Tango noticed it.

To be fair to Tango, it would have been hard to *miss* the moment he noticed it.

Tango reeled, scrambling back out of the bed. He hit the floor hard, and Jimmy was up in a flash, reaching down to help him. Tango gripped at his arm, and Scar saw the exact moment that he considered disarming the new deputy. He glanced down for a gun belt, and his face flushed with confusion and rage.

“What sort of lawman doesn’t carry a fucking *gun*?!” he demanded. Jimmy flushed at the words.

“One that knows better than to lower his guard around a man pretending to be asleep,” Scar lied. He wasn’t entirely sure that Tango was convinced by his claim, but that hadn’t been the point. Jimmy set his shoulders and hauled Tango to his feet, following Scar’s lead. “Since he’s feeling so much better, I think we can move this little shindig. Pop him in a cell for me, would you Jimmy? I’ve got a few extra questions for our new friend here.”

“Are you—”

“I’ll be right along after you,” Scar cut off the rest of the question. “Gotta tell Cub we’re stealing his patient.”

Jimmy hesitated, but nodded once more and led the still baffled Tango out of the room. Cub followed, his mouth already open in protest.

“You saw him, didn’t you Cubby?” Scar asked, before he could say anything. Cub shut his mouth. “Right as rain, he was.”

“Certainly didn’t look like he needed much more medical attention,” Cub agreed. “Though I’d have liked to see how his healing progressed further.” Cub gave him a pointed look and turned to leave. Then, in an exaggerated movement, as though remembering another detail, he added “Oh, and I’d appreciate it if you didn’t make a habit of ‘stealing my patients.’”

“One time thing,” Scar said, giving the words the trappings of a promise without actually swearing to anything. Cub sent him a look that told Scar he’d noticed the careful words but

didn't call his bluff. Scar gave himself a moment, straightening his hair and letting his pulse return to normal before he went out into the hallway.

Grian, he noticed, was gone. He bit down irritation, reminding himself that he hadn't told Grian he needed to stay put, because he hadn't realized he needed to before looking at Tango's injuries.

The smell of cigarette smoke hit him as he exited and he turned, surprised to see that Grian wasn't halfway back to the Ratcliffe homestead, intent on leaving on the next train out of here. When he saw Scar, his face shuttered. His lips were pinched and his eyebrows wary, but he held out the lit cigarette for Scar to take. He took it and tried to bite back his amusement when Grian opened up a familiar cigarette case to take out a second one for himself. He didn't bother pretending to check his pocket for it, either, even though he knew it would make Grian smile if he did. He tried to hold onto his anger, but all that was left was the cold fear at the base of his throat.

"I have two questions for you," he said. Grian closed his eyes and let the smoke wash down his lungs and back through his mouth. When the breath was fully expelled from his lungs, he turned to Scar, looking for all the world like he was on the gallows. "And I need you to answer them honestly."

"Alright." Grian agreed. Scar could see the way a muscle in his jaw jumped, the way his eyes looked past Scar to where Jimmy had entered the sheriff's office. He was just as terrified as Tango had been, but for a much different reason.

He hadn't run, though. That meant something.

"Three questions," Scar amended. Grian's lips twitched, the facsimile of a smile.

"Three questions, and only three questions, or no deal." Grian said.

It was moments like this that made Scar wonder. It had to be a joke, he told himself, Grian attempting to make light of a tense situation. But there was something in his bones that told him that Grian had to know.

"Fair enough," Scar agreed. A familiar weight settled on his shoulders, leaving the air between them charged. Around them, the shadows seemed to grow darker, the world around them muffled, giving them a facsimile of privacy. Scar steadied himself with a deep breath and met Grian's eyes. "Do you still trust me?"

"With everything I have." Grian answered, easily. It wasn't his usual answer, but it echoed what Grian had said earlier, which told Scar that it was the truth. Scar held up two fingers.

"How long ago was that man shot?"

Grian closed his eyes, and if Scar didn't know the man as well as he did, he might have thought he was sending up a silent prayer for help.

"A matter of hours," he answered, quietly.

“So, if he wasn’t shot a few weeks ago and kept on your ranch until he was healed enough to bring to Cub,” Scar continued, and Grian’s face went pale as he heard Scar detail the only other real possibility at hand, “then my final question is: how?”

“Before I answer that,” Grian said through gritted teeth. “Can I ask you to ask me any other question?”

“No.”

“Then will you swear to me that this stays between us?”

Scar blinked, absorbing this new information. Grian wouldn’t have asked that if this were something to do with himself. It was implicit between them that anything Grian told Scar about his situation was something that was not to be shared.

“Only so long as swearing that won’t endanger anyone in Del Sombra,” Scar said carefully, phrasing his question so it wasn’t a question. The weight hadn’t left him yet, even though his final question had been asked. He was still waiting for Grian’s answer, and he wasn’t a man who afforded loopholes. If Grian had to be honest for one more question, then Scar was going to make damn well sure it was the one that counted. Grian’s eyebrows were pinched again. Scar shoved away the instinct to go ask Cub for something to help.

“You *knowing* this might endanger anywhere between one and four people.” Grian sounded heartbroken. Scar could do the math. Three people were obviously the Ratcliffes, and the fourth... Grian wouldn’t care if it were endangering Tango. He didn’t know the man. The fourth person, Scar reasoned, had to be Scar himself.

“I swear that as long as I am not endangering any of my residents by keeping this a secret, it will stay between us.”

“That man, Tango, you said?”

Despite himself, Scar smiled. “Eavesdropper,” he accused.

“I’ve never dropped an eave in my life,” Grian fired back, like it was instinct, and continued, “Tango came onto our property last night. Pearl must have heard him, or maybe she was already awake. She doesn’t sleep well, on account of... everything.” Grian said pointedly, and Scar nodded. This was all lining up with the brief tidbits from earlier, even if the details were new. “She caught him stealing one of the horses. She used the rifle I keep in the kitchen and shot him.” Grian’s hands were shaking, now. Scar reached out and put out his cigarette for him before he could burn himself. Scar’s had long since burned out, the way his always did. “Jimmy found him in the field and managed to keep him from bleeding out until Pearl got to him. I didn’t want her to do it, I could see—” He trailed off, pushing his fingertips against his eyes. Scar wondered how many secrets he kept inside his head for it to ache the way it did, “but she wanted to try. She’d worn herself out earlier, helping one of the girls at the Florists.”

“Grian,” Scar said firmly. “You’re leaving out some important details. Such as context.”

Grian choked out a laugh, but it didn't sound like he was having any fun at all. "She wanted to heal him. She was going to heal him. It would have worked, too." He said, as if that made any sense at all.

The problem was that it did. It made a shocking, illuminating amount of sense. In his travels, Scar had never come across healing magic before, but he didn't doubt that it existed. How could he *now*, after seeing the living, breathing proof of it in Tango?

The weight lifted, leaving him with a sense of dread in its place. Scar thought that he understood Grian's hesitation, now.

"You mentioned one of the Florist girls. You mean Posy, don't you?" Scar asked, while his mind whirled, trying to put all of this new information into place. Grian nodded. His words seemed to have dried up.

He'd seen Posy, the day before last, in the aftermath, before the bruises had had time to set in; and he'd heard a pair of the girls whispering in the back about pearls. At the time, he'd figured the 'gentleman' that he was hauling off to a cell had tried to rob Posy and she'd fought back, but even then it hadn't sat quite right.

Not pearls after all. *Pearl*.

"How do the Florists know?" he asked, well aware that they'd gone beyond three questions, but something told him that now that the truth at the heart of the matter was broken open, Grian wouldn't care to answer the piddling ones.

"Same way Jimmy and I know. We met two of them on the way here. They were the reason we *came* here. Pearl wanted to check up on them, make sure they were getting on well. Bonnie was in rough shape, when we first came across them, and Pearl... fixed her. We didn't know she had limits to how much she could do in a day until last night. She's never needed to find out, before."

Scar reached out and brushed his fingers against Grian's elbow, briefly. It was all he could do, here. Grian pressed his arm back into the touch until Scar dropped his hand.

"My guess is that Tango owes her his life, with or without being *fully* healed." Scar said. Grian smiled, but it was a pale imitation of his usual grin. He took the cigarette back from Scar, popping open Scar's case to place it back with the others. He paused, looking at the row of them in the little silver box.

"One more secret for the road, sheriff." Grian said, rolling the extinguished cigarette between his fingers. There was a lightness to his voice that told Scar that he'd been holding all of this by himself for far too long, and he needed to let it out before it crushed him. "I *hate* it when she heals people."

"Afraid it will draw too much attention?" Scar guessed, a little surprised at Grian's vehemence. Grian shrugged.

“Sure, that’s part of it,” he agreed, snapping the case closed, “But the only reason she can do it is because I didn’t get to her in time to save her properly.”

Grian’s words were a hook on a fishing line, but Scar knew that if he tried to bite now, Grian would sooner cast the pole into the water than reel him in. Scar let the moment pass, and watched as Grian’s shoulders sagged, relieved.

“Go talk to Cub about that head of yours.” Scar said, “maybe he can figure out what makes you so difficult while he’s at it.”

“That’s just my natural charm.” Grian said, giving him a smile that was all teeth. And Scar shouldn’t have, Grian looked wan and half-dead on his feet, hollowed out after giving Scar one of the secrets he’d carried for so long; but even as his mind warned him against it, Scar *wanted*. Instead of saying anything he might regret, or acting on that surge of emotion, he stepped down the stairs, tipping his hat back up at Grian.

“Thank you,” he said quietly, earnestly, “for confiding in me.”

Grian’s smile, this time, was much softer, more genuine. One of the lines between his eyebrows disappeared. Scar turned and made his way to the jail, not leaning half as heavily on his cane as he’d thought he would need to when he’d first gone into Cub’s that morning.

Jimmy was talking, sounding friendly as anything when Scar made it back up the stairs and into the cool, dark room that served as his office. Tango was sitting on the low cot in the cell—the one that Scar had insisted on having put in, given his own experiences in overnight cell time laying on a cold, hard floor—and Jimmy had pulled up the chair from behind Scar’s desk. It took everything he had not to laugh. He had to maintain *some* level of professionalism, after all. Scar braced himself, picking out the angle he wanted to come at this from, and stepped inside.

He cleared his throat, and Jimmy’s fingers paused mid-gesture. He flushed as he realized what he’d been doing and stood.

“Hey there, sheriff,” Jimmy said, not quite looking Scar in the eye.

“Thank you for keeping an eye on our prisoner here, Jimmy,” Scar couldn’t quite keep the smile out of his voice, but he hoped Jimmy knew he wasn’t being laughed *at*.

“I’ll just, uh,” Jimmy stammered, moving to push the chair back behind the desk. Scar stopped him and sank into the seat himself, propping the cane against his knee, in full view of the prisoner. Tango zeroed in on it immediately.

“Would you mind running on down to Sausage’s and tell him I’ll be heading down for lunch in a while?”

Relief broke across Jimmy’s features and he bobbed his head, a quick ‘yessir’ falling into the air behind him as he left the room. Scar could see, thanks to a couple carefully placed mirrors, that he paused outside and covered his face with his hands for a few moments, before he shook himself off and continued walking.

“Well, Mr. Tango, I reckon we’ve got a lot to talk about.” Scar began when he turned back to Tango.

“I don’t reckon I talk to anyone who works for *him*.” Tango spat, the venom in his voice unsurprising in the least.

“Tango, Tango, Tango,” Scar tutted, retrieving the wanted posters again and holding them up side by side for Tango to see. “I don’t work for anyone but myself. I can understand your hesitance, *obviously*, but you really must learn a little bit of patience. Have all the facts before you act.” This was with a pointed look to where Tango had been wiggling his left foot. If Scar were a betting man, and sometimes he was, he would say that Tango had something tucked into the heel of his boot. A knife, maybe, or something that would be handy in helping him jimmy a lock. Tango’s foot stilled. Scar beamed at him. “See? We’re making progress already.”

“Your deputy doesn’t seem entirely up to snuff,”

“He was a little preoc—prock—prick—nope,” Scar sighed, because he *would* stammer over his words when he was trying to be intimidating, “he was a bit *distracted*, what with making sure you survived to see the sunrise.” Despite being unintentional, his little stumble seemed to have done the trick. Tango looked a little more at ease, some of the steel in his bones dissolving.

Tango’s eyes migrated back to the wanted posters, and more specifically to the older one. His eyes went softer than Scar had expected.

“Let me tell you what I think I’ve pieced together.” Scar said. He would have kicked himself for how gently the words came out, but he couldn’t quite bring himself to. “And you can tell me if I’ve missed the mark.”

Two hours later, Scar stepped back out into the sunshine, his cane back to the way it had been when he left his home that morning.

He managed to keep his hands from shaking as he walked to the Sanctuary Saloon, if only by the skin of his teeth.

Something bad is going to happen, Grian’s voice echoed in his mind.

Damn him and his uncanny gut feelings. And damn Scar for never listening to them. Behind him, Tango paused, squinting out into the world beyond the jail, clearly still in shock that Scar had believed him.

He needed to consult his cards.

~

Eleven Months Earlier

Grian (and the name still gave Scar a thrill and a half to use, knowing that he was one of the sole people this side of the Atlantic that was allowed to use it, knowing that it meant that

Grian held him in some sort of esteem, though what that might actually be was something that Scar dared not to think about) was still holding his hat in his hands. Scar stared at it from where he sat in the kitchen, not entirely sure what it meant. Was he uncomfortable in Scar's house? Sure, it was a little barren, with only some of Scar's knick-knacks from his travels scattered here and there, but Scar had told all of them that they could hang their hats on the hooks by the door. Surely Grian knew that that extended to him, as well?

"Hang your hat up, cool your heels," he said, eventually, after Grian straightened from scratching Jellie beneath the chin. Scar watched him closely as he spoke, knowing that his tone was wry, but hoped it was just on this side of jovial.

Grian, he noticed, flushed deeply. His fingers spasmed around the brim of the hat, and he half turned, like he wanted nothing more than to comply.

"Is this an English thing?" Scar asked, as the thought occurred to him. Neither Pearl nor Jimmy were half so reluctant, though he'd noticed Jimmy hesitate the first time he hung up his hat, too. He'd thought then that it was simply indecision on Jimmy's part but seeing Grian suddenly so unmoored by the thought of hanging up his hat, even though it was just the two of them, even though they were alone and far from the prying eyes of the town and the society that Grian had grown up in, had Scar wondering.

"I, er, sort of yes, sort of no," Grian said, wincing. He deflated a bit at the look Scar gave him. Grian cast his eyes about the room as he continued, and Scar got the impression that while the words were the *truth*, he wasn't being *entirely* forthcoming. "It's a bit presumptuous, is all. In London, hanging up one's hat is a sign that you are not simply close to the residents, but that you are close enough to presume to have a place in their home. So, it can be considered rude, if you're not sufficiently acquainted..." Grian trailed off, the words dying on his lips as Scar approached him.

Scar didn't entirely know what he must look like to Grian right now, half amused, half exasperated as he was, but before he had really known what he was doing, he was out of his seat and strolling towards Grian.

Presumptuous, the man had said. Scar could have laughed at the irony of the situation. He stopped, a breath closer than he knew he should have been, and several breaths closer than he needed to be as he plucked Grian's hat from his fingers. He leaned past Grian and hung the hat on the second hook in from the door, directly next to Scar's own.

"You *do* have a place here, Grian," he murmured, and was close enough to feel it as Grian shivered as the words brushed the shell of his ear. Too close. Scar stepped back and clapped a hand on Grian's shoulder to guide him further into the house. "Coffee?" he asked, already knowing the answer. Grian squirmed out from beneath his palm, leaving Scar feeling unnaturally cold. He kicked himself for it. He was playing with fire, and *this* was the sort of thing that can, would, and *did* burn a man. Even one like Scar.

"No hot bean juice today," Grian made a face, and Scar tried to return it with any look that didn't show how he felt at seeing it.

“You’re not going to try and make me drink your leaf water again, are you?” Scar teased. Grian laughed, the sound nearly a *giggle*, and Scar felt a little floaty. When Grian turned his back, he picked up the cup he’d been drinking from earlier, just to check he hadn’t accidentally grabbed something stronger than water. This confirmed, Scar tossed himself into a chair at the table.

“I’d have thought a man as superstitious as you would love tea,” Grian tossed over his shoulder as he set the water to boiling.

“Oh, I can read the leaves just fine, just don’t make me drink the stuff.”

“Let me try something,” Grian insisted. Scar didn’t answer, but he didn’t protest. He thought, perhaps, that he ought to do something with his hands, try to look discrete, but something in him didn’t want to bother, and something else in him was still worried that if he moved too quickly or blinked too often, Grian would return to being the wary, untrusting man that he’d met on the train platform. So, he tucked his hands behind his head, propped his feet up on the chair across from him, and watched Grian move about his kitchen like he belonged there.

Grian paused as he set the cups on the table between them, glancing down at the little leather pouch at the edge of the table. He flicked Scar an amused glance as he tipped Scar’s feet out of the chair he’d been using as a footrest.

“Are those tarot cards?” he asked. Scar beamed, more than a little surprised that Grian was able to recognize them without Scar having even taken them out of the bag he carried them in. He reached over and slid open the drawstring on the bag, spilling the smooth cards into his hand. Even after years of use, they weren’t faded or worn the way they should have been, but that wasn’t the only unusual thing about them. He shuffled the cards and drew one, with the same question in his mind that he always started with:

Where do I need to be?

He flicked the card onto the table with an air that, even alone, he could never quite shake.

For the four hundred and twenty-first day in a row, a trio of bags, gold coins spilling onto dark wooden floorboards stared back up at him.

“Justice,” he said, trying not to sound weary. “Upright.” Grian peered intently at the card, and Scar stared intently at Grian. He saw the moment that Grian noticed. He raised an eyebrow at Scar, fingers hovering over the card on the table.

“May I?” he asked. Scar nodded. Grian picked up the card, and Scar watched with no small amount of glee as he inspected it carefully. He turned it over, held it up to the light, flipped it, and then held his hand out in a silent question for the rest of the deck.

Scar passed it over, failing to fight back his grin. A few more silent moments passed before Grian, a disbelieving laugh in his voice, spoke again.

“Scar, none of these are labeled.”

“Nope,” Scar confirmed. At that, Grian *did* laugh.

“How do you know which card is which?”

Scar didn’t know how to explain, so he didn’t. “Trade secret, I’m afraid.”

“Trade secret,” Grian echoed. He shuffled the cards and drew one at random. His concentration, Scar decided, was very nearly *cute*. He was staring hard at the card in his hand, his eyes flickering over the little details. He turned it to show Scar. “The World?” He guessed. On the card, a ship was docked. A globe hung from its prow, and a large ginger cat reached up to bat at it. Scar was struck by the sight of the card in Grian’s hand, the magic in the cards seemed to curl around him in a way Scar hadn’t felt before.

He let his eyes focus as he smiled at Grian, let himself see the way the magic *did* shimmer around Grian’s fingers, curling and twisting almost possessively. He noticed, too, that the magic of the card that still rested on the table almost seemed to reach for Grian as well, Del Sombra’s card tapping at him like a curious cat might.

At their feet, Jellie meowed, twisting between Scar’s legs, breaking the momentary spell.

Scar plucked the card from his fingers and held it up, glancing from the card to Grian, and smirked.

“The Magician,” he corrected, and thus the next half hour was set, watching Grian try and guess which card was which, while Scar was subjected to drinking the tea Grian had made.

Watching Grian’s hands shuffle through his cards, hot leaf water had never tasted so sweet.

~

Now

The door slammed open, a full hour after Scar had expected it to. Grian marched into his house, looking thunderous, but there was something else in his eyes that Scar couldn’t quite decipher as Grian shut the door behind him. He didn’t wait for Scar to take his hat and put it where it belonged. He shoved his hat onto the hook, and something in the force of the gesture warmed Scar, even as it rattled him.

“How *dare* you,” Grian hissed, voice thick. Scar turned back to the bag he was packing and tried to decide what to say. He’d been having this problem for over an hour and a half, after he’d made up his mind. In the end he’d chickened out. He’d told Sausage and Jimmy, and had known that the news would, eventually, get back to Grian. “You ask me to stay, and I stay. Week after week, I’ve stayed, because you asked me to.” Grian was at his side, now. If Scar turned his head, Grian’s face would be all he could see. He didn’t want to look, to see the hurt beneath Grian’s anger, but he did it anyway.

Scar had gotten quite adept at telling when Grian was getting antsy, when he thought they might need to pack up and run again. At first, he’d told himself that he convinced Grian to stay for the sake of Jimmy and Pearl, who deserved a proper home, a place to rest their heads

without fear. *Then* he told himself that it was hard out on the road alone, and he knew that Grian had been planning to leave by himself on a number of occasions. Even he wasn't a good enough liar to pass that off as the truth, even to himself.

Stay, he asked Grian, whenever he started to look like a cornered animal. *I'll protect you*. He promised, and Grian would laugh a little, like he didn't quite believe him.

And he'd wake up without word that the Ratcliffe family had left in the night.

Stay, he'd asked Grian one night as they stood on his porch, Grian smoking, Scar pretending to smoke and getting away with it. He hadn't asked for honesty that night, the way he had today, but he'd gotten it anyway. When Grian had looked at him, his eyes reflecting the light from the windows like stars, brows drawn in confusion before he sighed and said *Alright*, Scar hadn't been able to stop himself.

He'd reached out, intending to place his hand on Grian's shoulder, a friendly touch, the same kind that he gave to Jimmy or Sausage. He'd caught the back of Grian's neck, instead, and Grian had stepped into his space, his eyes reflecting Scar's desire more brightly than the light from the windows.

Grian had told him, after, looking through the window to where they could see Pearl and Jimmy entertaining queen Jellie herself, that he needed to be thinking about the safety of his family above all else. Scar had agreed, of course. He hadn't *meant* to kiss Grian, after all. He had *meant* to keep that urge close, until he knew everything there was to know about Grian. He'd wanted to keep his emotions neutral until he knew whether or not loving Grian would be the sure suicide that he seemed to think it was.

That hadn't been in the cards, no matter how desperately Scar tried to talk himself out of it.

Still, even after that, when Scar asked him to stay, Grian would stay.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you," Scar said, because it was the only part of it that he could apologize for and have it be true. Grian threw his hands up, marching a few paces away from Scar and then back. He looked like he was moments from pleading with Scar.

"So that's it, then? You're just leaving," Grian hiccupped, stumbling over his words. He pressed the back of his hand to his mouth for a moment, as if having to force the words back down his throat, "leaving the town unprotected?" Scar knew what he'd nearly asked. He wished he didn't. He answered the question Grian *had* asked, instead of the other one.

"The people of Del Sombra will be protected whether I'm here or not. And Jimmy's acting as interim sheriff now, which is handy."

"Handy," Grian said, half-mocking, sounding like he was at a loss for all other words.

"I have to go," Scar insisted. He glanced down at his case, needing a break from Grian's unwavering gaze. His eyes caught on something, and on a whim, he picked up a familiar drawstring bag and held it out to Grian. "See for yourself."

Grian looked at the bag like *it* had betrayed him, instead of Scar. He snatched it from Scar's hand and walked out of the bedroom where Scar was packing. He heard Grian go into the kitchen.

He didn't dare follow.

The rustle of the cards was loud in the air between them, even from a room away. He heard Grian swear, then the shuffle of the cards again. More swearing. Again, and again, and again. Scar forced himself to fold up a shirt as he heard the sound of shuffling cards get more and more desperate.

Grian had never once disbelieved the magic that the cards held, though he'd asked once where Scar had gotten them. Scar had told a great, looping story that changed the topic all on its own. That made sense now, with what Scar knew about Pearl.

He heard the slam of Grian's open palm on the table, and moments later, the slam of the back door.

Scar left the bedroom and gathered up all of the cards, counting quickly, in case he'd need to go after Grian. But as he glanced up, Scar could see the man through the window in the kitchen. He was crouched in the middle of the range Scar had built for himself and given over to Jimmy, his fingers tangled in his hair. Scar put the bag back in his case and was surprised when he heard the back door open again. He'd thought, for sure, that Grian would leave without another word to him. It would be nothing less than what he deserved.

Grian leaned heavily on the door to Scar's bedroom, looking for all the world like he was watching Scar ride off to his death.

"If I asked you to stay," he began, his voice low, "would you?"

Scar stared at him for a moment, nonplussed. He'd never ascribed the same strength of emotion to Grian that he knew he carried in himself. Oh, sure, he knew Grian cared, knew Grian wanted him, but here was the proof of more, standing in front of him. The living, breathing, *heartbroken* proof in front of him.

"Yes," Scar said, his voice a croak as he fought back the wash of emotion that threatened him, "but you wouldn't."

And then, Scar did something that he knew, in his bones, was cruel. It was possibly—though this was a bit of a stretch, given he knew all the things that lay behind him—the cruelest thing he'd ever done.

"Stay here," he begged. Grian laughed, the sound wet with unshed tears. Scar stepped into his space and cradled Grian's face in his palms, forcing Grian to look at him. "Be here when I come back?"

"Don't pretend this isn't dangerous. You're going after a crew of known madmen—"

“Alleged madmen. The ‘alleged’ is important.” Grian stopped him, the side of his fist thumped against Scar’s chest lightly. He closed his eyes, clearly not wanting to see Scar’s face, the truth of the horrible possibility as he asked,

“What if you don’t come back?”

“Grian, look at me.” Scar pressed his forehead to Grian’s. He relished in the way Grian’s breath ghosted across his face. “Wild horses couldn’t keep me from Del Sombra,” he swore. He knew he needed to say more, even though the truth of the words struck fear into his heart, “and the devil himself couldn’t keep me from you.” Scar felt his lips quirk a little, and Grian’s eyes finally opened again to meet his own.

Grian looked at Scar like he was terrified of him. Grian looked at Scar like he was the last man on the planet who had a prayer of understanding him. Grian looked at Scar like he loved him. And right now, he was also looking at Scar like he’d already lost him.

Scar didn’t know how he’d missed it now that he was looking. Maybe it was that Grian always hid himself behind a veneer of competence, so no one would see how scared he really was. No one, save Scar. He wondered now if he himself had been too afraid to look, or if Grian had used the fear as a second mask.

This time, he kissed Grian because he meant to. It wasn’t much, barely contact at all, but it set Scar’s heart to hammering. He tried to lean in again, but Grian’s fist on his chest stopped him, showing a strength that Scar hadn’t realized was there.

“Don’t,” Grian said, the words a plea. He pressed his forehead to the other side of his fist, muffling his words, but not silencing them. “If I kiss you again, I won’t be able to stand you leaving me behind. I won’t be able to stay because I’ll be too busy following you.”

“Grian—” Scar tried, but Grian stepped back, his palm still flat against Scar’s chest, holding him at arm’s length.

“Don’t you dare kiss me goodbye, Sheriff Goodfellow.” Grian said. Scar didn’t think, in the entire time he’d known Grian, that Grian had ever said his last name. He didn’t even realize that Grian had *known* it. Part of him wished, now, that he’d chosen a different one, back when he first rolled into town. “Instead,” Grian continued, and something in the set of his mouth changed. Something in the *air* changed. Scar could taste it. “Instead, you leave as planned, and when you get back, you kiss me as many times as you want.” Grian took a step back, so he was no longer touching Scar, but kept his hand outstretched. Even without looking, Scar could almost see the magic dancing in his palm. “Deal?”

He *had* to know. Surely, Grian had to know. He felt a surge of pure emotion rise in him, nearly blocking his throat.

Nearly.

He took Grian’s hand and bent over it, twisting their joined hands so he could press a kiss to the inside of his wrist. One last token of affection before he agreed.

“Deal.” Scar said, breathless with the weight of it all.

Chapter End Notes

How we feeling everybody? :D :D :D

As always, comments are so welcome and gleefully appreciated! I've got a lot going on irl right now, so I don't know if I'll be able to respond throughout the week.

Unfortunately, I couldn't last week (I'm gonna go do that now ^.^;), but please know I read and cherish each one!

You can find the artists for this work at: [Hybbart](#) and [Foxyola!](#)

You can also find me on tumblr [here!](#)

More than Mortal

Chapter Summary

Tango wakes up, and he's not dead. That's a good start, in his opinion. Unfortunately for him, the day goes downhill from there.

Chapter Notes

Here we go!! Tango's chapter :D I am so excited to share this one with you!!
Also, sorry for updating a day late >.< All that irl stuff came to a point yesterday, but hopefully it should be smoother sailing from here out.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When Tango first opened his eyes again, he thought that there had been some kind of mistake. A cosmic mix up that had sent him up instead of down, the second time around. A man looked down on him from above, his hair glowing in the light of the rising sun, and he looked at Tango with such *care* that Tango thought he might drown in it, a fitting third death that would send him right back down again. Then, the man seemed to notice him and jolted back. In the same moment, the pain kicked in, and memories crashed over him. The same face, in flickering lamp-light, holding a hand to his neck to stop the bleeding. He'd tried to steal a horse, but he hadn't seen the girl in the corral until she was already running back inside.

Damn, that was sloppy.

When the man's shadow fell over him again, he had his eyes closed, and he feigned sleep even as his shoulder was shaken. Even as the surface he was laying on pitched and dipped under what he assumed was the weight of another person, even as something soft was tucked beneath his head, he kept his eyes closed and his breathing regular. Whatever he was laying on—he assumed it had to be a cart—pitched under him again, and he heard a faint clicking noise, and the sound of hooves on grass.

Tango's mind was whirling, trying to piece together everything he knew.

One: he wasn't dead. Bonkers, but he could work with it.

Two: he wasn't in *nearly* as much pain as he thought he should have been. He could still feel the bullet tearing through the skin of his neck. *That* had hurt like nothing else. His head was pounding, likely from the resultant blood loss. He may have even hit his head when he hit the

ground. He was lucky he hadn't been trampled under the hooves of the stallion he'd tried to steal. But his neck... it ached, and it *itched*, but it didn't feel like the fire he'd come to recognize as a recent bullet wound. He didn't know if he ought to be concerned or relieved by that.

Concerned. Definitely concerned.

Three: the same man he'd stolen from last night was the one caring for him in the light of day. *That* made Tango feel seven kinds of topsy turvy. He shoved three to the back of his mind. Before he could continue his list and judge whether it would be safe for him to try and jump up out of the cart and try to run, he heard a voice call out.

He froze.

"What are you doing?" the voice asked, and for a moment, Tango was sure that he'd been caught, before someone else answered for him.

"Got Bullseye back," chirped the second voice, too awake and chipper for what was obviously such an early morning. That chirp faded as he spoke again, turning into something horrified. "Jesus, G, your hands—"

"Go put a shirt on," the first voice—G, whatever that stood for—said instead of answering. "Honestly, why didn't you do that before you went looking for Bullseye?"

The second man mumbled something.

"What?"

"I didn't want to waste any more time," he said, louder, exasperated. "Now if you'll stop interrogating me, I'll go get changed and we can take this poor man to the doctor!"

"*Poor ma*—he tried to steal our horse, Tim!"

If Tango could think past the shock, he think he might have snickered at the offense in G's voice.

"Sorry," Tim said, from further off, "Can't hear you!"

A frustrated noise from the other man was all the proof Tango had that he wasn't alone. So much for his 'giddy-up and skedaddle' plan. It was for the best. If he was honest, the *thought* of opening his eyes right now made his head pound like a whole mess of people were dancing a jig on his skull.

He screwed his eyes shut and resisted the urge to clench his teeth against the pain. When the bickering returned and the cart—definitely a cart—began to move, swaying gently with the rhythm of the horse it was hitched to, Tango let it lull him back to the sweet, cool darkness of sleep.

Tango dreamed, as he always did, of his last day on Earth.

It had started, Tango remembered now, after polishing the memory again and again, (and again and again and again) when Impulse had frowned at his pocket watch.

His lips had pursed, and when he'd looked up again, neither Tango nor Zedaph were bothering to look ordinary.

"Next marker," Impulse said, brusque in a way he only ever was when he was worried, "count with me." Tango had taken out his own watch, and when the marker passed, he began to count.

The marker after that had passed five seconds too soon.

"We're going too fast." Tango had said. He did some calculations, then did them again, and then a third time, to be sure. "Zed, budge. I need to talk to the stoker. Now."

He didn't swear, didn't let himself look out of place, even as he wandered through the second-class carriage in his best worn-out suit and into first class. A man in uniform tried to stop him, but Tango flashed him a smile that was all teeth and no substance.

"The train has been taken hostage. I've been sent to talk to the stoker," he let some of his anxiety bleed through, to lend his words some credence. The train *was* going to be taken over, after all, if they could get the thrice-blamed thing to slow down, or even stop, before the tracks blew out from *under* the train, instead of ahead of them at a properly safe distance.

The man in the rail line uniform straightened, looking down at Tango like he stank.

"That isn't funny."

"You see me laughing?" Tango hissed. His blood was running cold, now, the calculations in his mind picking up speed with every lost second, closer and closer to the same end result. Behind him he heard a scream, and Zedaph's signature laugh. The highfalutin attendant glanced behind him, but he still had a hand on Tango's arm, making it so he couldn't get past.

In the end, he'd decked the man and sprinted through first class, not caring what he looked like in the least. He'd tossed the stoker out of his domain, locked the door, and used the shovel to scrape the coals out of the fire. His clothes melted to him, but the engine started to cool, at last.

Not fast enough. Not soon enough. And Tango realized he should have fought to make it go faster instead. It would risk the engine exploding, sure, but they may have passed the real danger.

Too late.

The stoker car passed over where the tracks were set to blow.

The utility car followed.

First class.

And then the fuse line ran out.

That minute of distance, Tango had reasoned for the entire time he'd existed afterward, and the insulation of the stoker car, must have been the only reason he survived.

He'd crawled from the wreckage, his body burning and every sense awash with pain, with one thing on his mind: his crew.

Tango had always been told he had the Devil's own luck, and luck he thought it must have been. The Stoker's shovel had shattered in his hands as he dug the last grave, so Tango had finished it with his bare, blistered hands, and as he'd done so, he saw the watch chain melted into the charred skin of Impulse's arm.

He hadn't been able to tell one broken body from another, in the wreckage, but he'd wanted to give Impulse and Zedaph the burial they deserved.

In the end, Tango had dug nearly a hundred graves, only just deep enough for the bodies. Some had been obvious that they weren't who he was looking for, but once he'd started, he found he couldn't stop. None of them were meant to die, why shouldn't they get graves, too?

It had started to rain, at one point. Great honking drops that wet the ground and soothed his burns. That had made the digging a fair sight easier, even as he slipped and slid in the mud. His busted eardrums couldn't hear the roar of thunder overhead, but the lightning helped light his task, when the sun set.

And when the deed was done, he'd fallen down, propped up against a piece of twisted metal that had once been a carriage, and realized he had no energy left to bury himself. The ground under him was dry again, no trace of the water that had rained down on him. How long had he been working, for the earth to dry back out, he'd wondered.

Tango had heard footsteps, and forced himself to open eyes he hadn't realized he'd closed.

A man walked towards him, past the row of graves. He looked like the sort of man to sit on his own in first class. The sort of man, Tango thought, that would buy himself a new boat every time the old one got wet.

Worse still, he didn't have a scratch on him. Even Tango, lucky as he was, could feel the pull of burnt skin at his back, even as the rest of his body went numb.

"How'd you make it out so cool?" he asked the stranger, as he stopped in front of him.

Closer, Tango could see that his suit was excellently tailored, the stitches small enough that Tango couldn't see them, even when the man bent down to place a hand on Tango's forehead. Tango's eyes drifted, without his input, away from the man's face and locked onto the cane he was using to help keep his balance as he bent over Tango.

It was pure white, nearly gleaming in the hot summer sun, and on top of the cane was a curved handle. The longer that Tango looked at it, the more he realized that the edges of the cane, and where the handle met the shaft, were actually slightly pink. The edge of the handle facing him was a deep red. Marrow-red. Fear prickled at the back of Tango's neck.

The stranger tutted at him.

"Looks a fair bit like the creek rose on you, eh?" he said, his voice the same drawl of a hundred men Tango had stolen from over the years. He flashed Tango a smile, his teeth the same pearl-white as his cane.

Tango swallowed.

"It—we weren't," Tango stammered, suddenly fully aware of how dry his throat was for the first time in... hours? Days? He'd lost track with all the digging, but he was thirsty as anything. His voice was drier than the dirt he sat on. "It was our last job." His throat clicked as he swallowed, and despite the grief that rose in him, he couldn't feel the prickle of tears at the corners of his eyes. "We were gonna go straight. Start up a shop." His head thunked against the carriage, his neck too weak to support it any longer. The pain at his back faded.

He heard, more than felt the man's cane hit his knees.

But then he *did* feel it.

He winced and scrambled back, away from the stinging, burning pain of the impact.

The stranger towered over him, his eyes glowing red beneath the wide brim of his hat. The smile had gone from his face, and with a sudden, horrified clarity, Tango knew who he was.

"Get up," the Devil told him, "And walk."

~

When Tango woke the second time, it was to being unloaded from the cart. Hands hooked under his shoulders and around his ankles, positioning him like a corpse between a poor man's pallbearers. He tried to make his head loll convincingly, but that hurt like the dickens, so he just held himself still and kept his breathing even.

When they put him down again, he reasoned that he had to still be alive, such as he was, because even Hell had better mattresses than the lumpy thing he'd been laid upon. There was some fussing, some swearing, and one of the men from the ranch he'd tried to rob left. At least, he thought that's what happened. It was blamed hard to figure out what was going on with his eyes closed.

Ten minutes later, a pair of gentle hands had finished wrapping a fresh bandage around his neck, where it scratched at his throat. The wound he'd been given itched like anything.

He listened for a while, his eyes closed as the same voice from earlier—Tim, if memory served—spoke to a girl, then another man that Tango assumed, from context, had to be the doctor. And then the room went quiet.

He could still hear the shifting of fabric, and some faint humming, and he figured that he wasn't going to be left alone.

That left him with very few options, he reasoned.

He could try and bust out of here, not knowing if he'd keel over dead from his injury. He wasn't too keen on that one.

He could bide his time, wait until whatever passed for the law got here and try to claim that he'd been confused, had gotten lost, and only meant to *borrow* the horse.

... Yeah, that one would go over like a lead balloon, too.

He ran through idea after idea, each less plausible than the last, until the door opened again, and he realized he was out of time.

"—Back in a minute," said a new voice, forced cheer in every word.

"Morning, Sheriff," his constant companion said. Tango did his level best not to wince.

Out of time, once again.

"Morning, Deputy," the sheriff said back, and *oh*, wasn't that just the pink. Of all the people he could have chosen to rob in the night, he'd chosen the *deputy* of this little, weird town.

"He hasn't moved," deputy Tim said. Did he know that Tango was awake, then? Surely not, or he would have said something. Told Tango he was under arrest. *Anything*.

The sheriff made a noise in the back of his throat, to show he'd heard the words. Tango heard the dull *thunk* of something hitting the wall, and then, for the second time that morning, his bandages were being moved aside.

The sheriff made a small, choked noise at whatever he saw. Tango wasn't worried. If he wasn't dead yet, he didn't think this was what would do it. The sheriff replaced the bandages, tucking them back into place expertly, but didn't move back.

Instead, Tango felt every hair on his arms stand on end as the man leaned closer, so that when he breathed his next words, only Tango would hear them.

"Rise and shine, Mr. Hagan."

Tango's heart stopped. There was a furious debate that he'd had with Etho on more than one night, while the fire crackled and Bdubs and Skizz slept, about whether or not Tango's heart still *beat*, given the circumstances. But in this moment, it sure felt like it had stopped.

He couldn't have kept his eyes closed, or the fear from his face even if it had meant his salvation, because *this*? This was the worst-case scenario.

The echo of Impulse's laughter rang in his ears, but he forced himself to listen to what the sheriff was saying.

“—the old ‘fake name on the wanted poster’ trick,” he said, winking at his deputy. “We’ve all done it.” For the first time, Tango managed to take in what he looked like. Dark hair was shoved back, away from his forehead, and Tango could see the imprint of where his hat usually sat, squishing the strands around his temples. His eyes were a bright green that seemed to stare into Tango’s very soul, but even they were overshadowed by the scars crisscrossing the man’s face. He smiled at Tango like *he* knew what Tango was seeing, but he didn’t think *Tango* did.

“I don’t know any Hagan,” Tango said, the lie sharp and peppery on his tongue.

Why would you use a sheriff’s name, Tango?! Zed had demanded, his voice breathless with suppressed laughter.

I panicked! Tango had laughed back. The name had been slapped on every wanted poster for miles, and every time they’d seen it, it had seemed just as funny as the first time.

But that had been twenty years and a lifetime ago. There wasn’t a sane man on Earth who would look at him and think of the old, faded poster of Colby Hagan, wanted man, found dead on the Eastward line.

This, he thought, was *not* a sane man. He cast about in his mind for a suitable name he could use.

“My name is—” he began, but he didn’t get a chance to finish the lie.

“Tango?”

Tango jolted, as if struck, and if that weren’t damning enough, the poster that the man pulled out from his inner breast pocket surely was. Tango’s breath stuck in his chest. He’d never bothered figuring out if he still needed to breathe, but this man seemed determined to help him find out in the worst way.

The sheriff held up two posters, side by side, and Tango made a small noise. The first one was newer, drawn up after the first time he’d been seen with Etho and Skizz, but the second one... the one for Colby Hagan showed a version of Tango that he never thought he’d see again. The sheriff took back the newer poster—the harder, angrier Tango—and turned it so he could read from it. The words washed over him, nothing but noise.

The Tango on the other poster was young, still. Soft in the face and with eyes that smiled easily. You couldn’t tell in the black and white portrait, but his eyes had been brown, then.

Tango had spent so long trying to bury that part of himself, dead, gone, unmourned, unremarkable, that he felt more than a little overwhelmed at the sight of him being flashed around so cavalierly. His fingers itched to take the poster from Scar and tuck it somewhere safe. Maybe ride out on the Eastward line and bury it next to everyone else.

The sheriff folded up the posters once again. Tango only just stopped himself from crying out or reaching for the older one. Would the sheriff take it as an attack if Tango lunged for the

paper in his hand? Probably. He was still tempted to do it, to save the singular remnant of proof that he had been, once upon a time, human. Alive. *Happy*, even.

He hadn't thought about Impulse's laugh in a very long time. Hadn't thought about Zed clutching his sides at the sight of the poster with Tango's shiny new (fake) name on it.

He was surprised to find that the usual ache that came when he thought about them was dulled, softened by the memory of how they had been when they were alive.

As the sheriff stood and picked up what he'd leant against the wall, there was a flash of white in Tango's periphery, sharp and blinding. Tango's subconscious recognized it before he did, and he moved, only vaguely aware that there was nowhere for him to move *to*.

His shoulder hit the ground hard, but he barely noticed the shock of pain that ran through him as he finally, *finally* registered what he was seeing.

Tango's legs *burned*, and he could almost feel the weight of the cane against his shoulders.

His voice caught in his throat, stopping the demand of where the sheriff had gotten it, if he knew how doomed he and his little town were, because Tango would have known the Devil on sight, and this man wasn't him.

A hand on his arm shocked his eyes away from the cane of bone, and he looked up into the concerned face of the deputy.

If it hadn't been for the panic surging in Tango's veins, he would have said the man was handsome. If he hadn't been so bone-terrified, he'd have seen the strong jaw and kind brown eyes and been amused that there were two different kinds of dangerous men in this room.

Absurdly, Tango had the urge to throw the man behind him, to shield him and his concern from what Tango's instincts told him was coming.

He *also* had the urge to escape. He shook off the absurd instinct to protect a man he'd never met and flicked his eyes down to his waist. If he was fast enough, he could grab the gun, go out the door, and run to the tracks. If he doubled back on himself and hid in the town for a day or two, they'd never find him.

Tango blinked. He shook his head and looked again for the gun that every self-respecting bull would have at their hip.

He really didn't think he could be held responsible for everything after that.

He was still thinking about it all, his thoughts swirling around in his pan and back out again. Everything coherent was as thin as river-sand, and he didn't think he had a single thought to spare as the deputy marched him out of the sickhouse and off to the jail. Part of him felt a bit bad for yelling at the guy about not having a gun, but Tango didn't think he'd ever seen a deputy without one.

Maybe he just hadn't seen too many deputies.

Tango blamed his distraction on the fact that it wasn't until the deputy had opened the cell door and gestured at him that Tango registered his accent.

"In you go," the deputy said, stiff as a board. Tango followed his hand and sat on the rickety cot in the corner. Better accommodation he'd had for sure, but this was far from the worst. Tango tried to focus on his surroundings, and not the Belvidere on the other side of the bars, because it was bad enough form to be caught staring sideways at another man, but the bull that had you locked up? That was stupider than even Tango could justify. He cast his eye about the room instead, as he asked,

"You an Old Countryman?"

"Oh, um, yes?"

"What're you doing all the way out in the barrens?" Tango asked and was surprised to be greeted with silence. He looked back at the deputy and almost winced at the change in demeanor. Wrong question. The man's face had shut down. On another man it might have been a blank expression, but there was a sour pinch to the deputy's lips that belied his true emotions.

Nothing good, then.

Tango, half to change the subject so the man wouldn't be tempted to take any negativity out on him, and half to get that expression off of his face, tried again. "Got a name other than deputy, deputy?"

Tango couldn't well tell the man that he'd *heard* him talking out on the ranch, now could he?

"Oh," he said, as if surprised to be asked. True to purpose, his expression cleared. "Jame—Jim—It's Jimmy. My name is Jimmy." Tango felt a jolt of surprise. Had he misheard? The headache may have faded, thanks to the nap in the cart, but he was more than sure he'd heard this man get called *Tim*. He couldn't rightly ask, though. He had nothing to lose but his pride, if he did, but there was something in the way that Jimmy was holding himself that made Tango want to preserve the moment.

Jimmy ducked his head and turned away from Tango, but not before he saw the flush rise on his cheeks.

Tango pursed his lips to keep the smile off his face. He stood and stuck his hand through the cell bars, waving it a little to catch the flustered deputy's eye.

"Nice to meet you, Jimmy. Wish it were under better circumstances."

Jimmy hesitated but took his hand and shook it.

"Nice to meet you, Tango," he sounded as though he didn't know if he should be saying it. And then, with a wince, "Sorry my sister shot you."

Tango reached up to his neck, the touch itself hurt, but the fact that up until this point, he'd nearly *forgotten* what had landed him on the sawbones' cot was more than a touch disturbing. Had the shot taken out some of his nerves? He wasn't a doctor; he had no real way to know.

Then the rest of Jimmy's sentence caught up to him.

"Wait, she's the one who shot me?" When he'd seen her running inside, he'd assumed she'd raised the alarm and someone else had come after him on another horse. Dangerous, but more doable than shooting standing at a man outstripping you on a horse *in the dark*. "That's a blazes of a shot. Who is she, Annie Oakley?"

Jimmy puffed up, clearly proud of his sister. "Well," he said, clearly for lack of anything else. Tango kept leaning on the bars, and now that they were talking, it would've been rude *not* to look. Jimmy was just as handsome as Tango's first impression had given him. Though, unfortunately, this time he was wearing the proper amount of clothing. His skin was tanned from being out in the sun, and his shoulders and arms filled out his shirt quite nicely. He seemed prone to embarrassment, Tango recalled, and Tango thought that if they'd met like this when he was properly alive, he'd have teased him just to see the way he blushed. Even now, he couldn't quite stop himself.

"And what about you, crackshot?" he asked, "any particular reason you don't carry a gun?"

Jimmy's ears went pink.

"This again?"

Speaking of first impressions, Tango thought to himself with a slight grimace. "Er—" he said, the picture of eloquitation, "Sorry about earlier. I wasn't at my best."

"Scar did seem to have you a little on edge." Jimmy allowed, granting him a small smile.

"Scar?" Tango demanded, shocked. The name of the man who had *finally* caught him and put it all together was *Scar*? That was almost as bad a name as Tango! Granted, the man was covered in them, but Tango didn't think that should go into a name. He whistled, low. "Now that's a fake name if ever I heard one."

Jimmy made a small, offended noise. "It's not like 'Tango' is much more believable!"

"Yeah, but I ain't the one running a town. Outlaws are *supposed* to have fake names." Tango didn't bother mentioning that Tango *was* his real name. As real as Impulse was named Impulse, and Zedaph had been named Zedaph. When you were picking your own name, usual rules went out the window. "Looks like you're the only one here with a real name, Jimmy-boy."

"It's not like Scar is his given name," Jimmy protested.

"Oh? Then what is it?"

Jimmy opened his mouth. Closed it again. Tango pursed his lips again, trying to hold in the giggle threatening to escape.

“... You don’t know your own sheriff’s name?”

“I’ve never asked him! Anyway, I’m sure Grian knows it.”

“‘*Grian*’?” Tango couldn’t hold back the laugh this time. “Is anyone in this town named something normal?”

“Yes! There—there are loads of us! Me, for one, and Shelby, and Scott, and Cleo, and Sau—um, Rose and Posy and Daisy—”

“Awful lot of flower names,” Tango pointed out with a raised eyebrow. Jimmy, for some reason, blushed more deeply. “And what was the one right before the bouquet?”

“I—that’s not important!”

“Mmhmm,” Tango allowed. He nodded solemnly, like he was agreeing with Jimmy, but when he met Jimmy’s eyes again, all the air left his lungs in a wheeze. It might have been a trick of the shadows, or the strange number of mirrors in the room, but he thought he saw the corners of Jimmy’s mouth twitch in response.

“Alright, alright! I’m leaving. I gotta go... check on the sheriff.” Jimmy said. His mouth was drawn downward, the picture of a frown, but Tango thought he could hear a bit of amusement in his voice. Or he was reading into it. He was probably reading into it. Jimmy turned, the movement reflected in half a dozen mirrors scattered around the room, and walked out of Tango’s sight.

Tango doubted he’d ever see the man again.

His giggles faded as the reality of his situation settled back in. Part of him wanted to kick himself for not ingratiating himself to the deputy. He wondered if he’d managed to catch a touch of hysteria, if such a thing were possible. He’d been through an awful lot over the last few weeks. If such a thing were going to happen to him, it would be now.

Absently, he wondered what it might take to make *Jimmy* laugh.

He didn’t have long to ruminate, though, because footsteps on the stairs alerted him to someone coming in.

“That was fast,” he told Jimmy, as Jimmy dragged over a chair. Jimmy held his head up, chin high, and looked over Tango’s head.

“I had another question,” he said as he sat. He looked determined not to be side-tracked this time. Tango sighed and sat back on the cot.

“G’won then.”

“How’d you get Bullseye to let you ride him?” he asked, “only I’ve ever been able to stay on his back, and even then only for a minute.”

Tango blinked, a bit startled by the question. He'd been expecting something more like "why did you choose a life of crime, criminal?" or "what's the circumference of your neck?" not... this.

"I've... ridden harder horses," Tango admitted slowly. Even at the thought, he could feel the chill of Buttercup's neck beneath him, unnatural cold trying to steal the very life from his body.

"You're just as bad as he was," Tango said, leaning his cheek on the neck of the horse. Etho's eyes flashed to him and narrowed. Tango focused on the one that matched his own. Once, he'd thought he and Etho were the same, or near enough. He knew better, now. "He wouldn't let me sit, and you won't let me walk. Either way I don't get a say in it."

"C'mon, Tango!" Bdubs cried from the horse beside him, "that's not fair."

"I ain't speaking to you," Tango spat. He had a shard of the handle of Skizz's six-gun tucked in his palm, and he gripped it tight. Tried to let it ground him.

"Tango, buddy—" Etho said, cajoling. "We're safe, now. It's all square with Ren."

"'Til we're not." Tango insisted, closing his eyes. He wished he hadn't. He could still see Skizz's broken fingers, snapped like a fistful of pencils beneath Ren's boot. The mangled twist of bones after Ren had shoved him out the window and had him dragged back inside. The beheading the Hand had given him had almost been a mercy, after that. "'Til it's my turn under that hatchet." Etho shook his head.

"It'll all come right, you'll see."

Jimmy leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. Tango had never seen a man so intent on listening.

Haltingly, Tango tried to explain.

They talked for a while, while Tango forced his mind away from hooves that froze the earth beneath them and a man at his side, guiding the horse Tango was trapped on.

The door swung back open what had to be only minutes later, breaking the spell that Jimmy had him under, pinned beneath the weight of brown eyes on him. The words had seemed to flow without his say-so, and Jimmy seemed to be under the same enchantment, telling a story about the horse that Tango had (almost successfully) stolen with all the vim and vigor of a professional.

The sheriff cleared his throat, and Jimmy immediately stopped demonstrating the size of the fence the horse had jumped *with* Jimmy on his back. He stood fast enough that Tango worried he might get dizzy and hit his head.

"Hey there, sheriff," he said, trying to sound casual. Tango's ears started to ring as he stared at the cane. He wondered if this were some kind of test. Hell, maybe he'd never really escaped at all.

Jimmy gripped the back of the chair he'd dragged over and moved to put it back, but the sheriff waved him off and sat heavily in it.

It occurred to Tango, for the first time, that the sheriff might actually *need* the cane. Still, Tango stayed on his guard as the man asked Jimmy to fetch him lunch. There were only two reasons Tango could see for sheriff Scar to have that cane, and neither of them endeared him much to Tango.

"Well, Mr. Tango, I reckon we've got a lot to talk about." Sheriff Scar said, after Jimmy was gone.

"I don't reckon I speak to anyone who works for *Him*," Tango spat. He'd made that mistake once before. He'd thought he and Etho were kin, both at the mercy of Old Scratch. He'd realized too late that he'd never been more wrong.

He hadn't wanted to escape while Jimmy was here, hadn't wanted to bother trying. But now the thin knife in his boot seemed to be calling to him. He couldn't get free while the sheriff was in here, obviously, but—

The sheriff pulled out the posters again. Like a moth to a flame, Tango's eyes drifted, catching his attention, and drawing it away from his vague plan of escape. "I don't work for anyone but myself," Scar said. He sounded believable, but Tango felt like that was almost *worse*. It felt like he was doing some very fast talking. "I can understand your hesitance, obviously, but you really must learn a little bit of patience. Have all the facts before you act."

He glanced down at Tango's boot, exactly where the knife would have been, and Tango realized that he'd been bouncing his leg as he considered his escape. He put his heel to the floor.

"See? We're making progress already!"

Tango didn't quite like how cheery Scar sounded about that. He changed the subject, tried to throw his new adversary off-balance. "Your deputy doesn't seem entirely up to snuff," he pointed out.

"Well," sheriff Scar said, dismissively, "He was a little preock—prock—prick, nope. Pre-occu—"

Tango... didn't know what to make of that, as he watched the cocksure wordsmith tumble away and leave behind an exhausted, frustrated looking man.

Just a man.

Slowly, a third option for how Scar had gotten the cane rose in his mind. He'd heard the camp stories, the songs people wrote.

"He was a bit *distracted*," Scar continued at last, finally deciding on a different word, "what with making sure you survived to see the sunrise." Tango, unfortunately, couldn't fault this logic. He *also* felt bad for saying anything against Jimmy, who had been nothing but nice to

him. He let the topic drop and marked it in his head as a total failure. Scar put the wanted ads on the desk and turned back to him. “Let me tell you what I think I’ve pieced together,” he said, like Tango were a puzzle for him to solve.

“You’re a bandit, obviously. One of the number calling themselves ‘The Bettermost Gang,’” Scar raised an eyebrow. Tango bit back the explanation, remembering Skizz’s excitement as they put the name together, and then remembering Skizz as he last saw him, when Etho dragged Tango out of the bit house. Tango nodded against the lump in his throat. “I’ve heard by the wire that a couple weeks ago, you ran afoul of the Red Hands, that right?”

“Yeah. Yeah, that’s right.”

“My guess, if you’re here and the rest of your gang ain’t, either you spooked, or they died.”

Tango’s mouth dried up. He could either talk, or he could sit here in silence and wait to die.

He’d done that once. He didn’t fancy dying again.

“Both,” he admitted, “Dubs got in deep playing Faro. He wouldn’t let me deal, so he kept losing. Skizz—” Tango choked on the lump in his throat, but kept going, not caring how raw he sounded, “Skizz was only meant as temporary collateral, while we got the cash. It didn’t turn out that way.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“I couldn’t stay with them, after that. So, I ran. But Etho can’t let me leave.”

“Why’s that?”

Tango could have answered. Could have spilled the whole story. Told Scar about Buttercup, Etho’s horrible horse. Could have spilled the beans about who Etho really was and why he would never, ever leave Tango alone.

“How’d you get that cane?” he asked, instead. It was half an answer, anyway.

“I’m very persuasive,” Scar said with a sly grin.

“You haven’t—I mean. *Y’know*.” Tango said, looking around. He didn’t want to say too much and sound like a lunatic if this were all some crazy coincidence.

“I’ve made six Deals, Mr. Tango.” Scar said, beatifically. The same way a man might say he’d won prize horse at the fair, or that the weather was really quite fine. He picked up the cane and held it out, so Tango could see. “And *I’m* not the one getting the shorter end of the stick.”

Horror did not begin to describe the emotion Tango felt.

“He’s going to want to watch you bleed,” he said, quietly.

“Almost certainly,” Scar said, “But I’ll burn that bridge when I come to it.” He stood, using the cane to help walk him to the bars. “Now, the way I see things, I’ve got every right to hang you. Unless, of course, you give me a *very* good reason not to.”

Tango weighed his options.

They weren’t very different, as it turned out. All bad, for one reason or another. He slumped against the wall and spoke to the ceiling.

“The last two members of the Bettermost are coming after me. If you don’t let me leave, your pretty little town will get caught in the crossfire.”

“And?” Scar prompted, as if none of that would have been enough. Tango had forgotten, momentarily, that he wasn’t speaking with a sane man.

“And,” Tango said, hearing the whizz of rope through the gallows, “Etho has the authority to drag down anyone he comes across. Anyone who has so much as stood across the room from the Devil and smiled at him. And with some contracts, he’s got to do it, whether he wants to or not.”

Scar went very still. And for a very long moment, he stayed that way, staring at Tango like Tango would take the words back if he waited long enough.

Tango let him wait.

~

Six weeks earlier

They still trusted Tango. Despite everything, despite the swearing, and tying Tango to Buttercup, and swapping out Night Hawks so that Tango was never alone, they still trusted him on the job.

That didn’t mean he wasn’t being *watched*.

That was what made this such delicate work.

Today, that was going to be their mistake.

Etho sidled up to him, his steps confident, steady.

“You’re looking squirrely today,” he said, his voice low. His kerchief was around his neck still, leaving his mouth bare and his words unmuffled.

Tango kept his eyes ahead, watching as the smoke in the air got closer to them.

“My last train ride didn’t go so well, if’n you recall,” he cut his eyes over to Etho, who looked back, almost impassive, if it hadn’t been for the furrow between his brows.

If he says something, Tango thought, maybe I won’t do it.

Etho said nothing.

Tango thought he heard the intake of breath, the beginning of *something*, but Etho exhaled again without a word.

And then Bdubs was back, and the moment to speak was gone.

“Aw, hey,” Bdubs said, once they were ensconced in the carriage. It seemed like Tango had been showing his anxieties a bit too plainly on his face. “this’ll go just as smooth as the last job did. We work so well together! Even without,” Bdubs, at least, had the presence of mind to glance around and stop himself before he dropped Skizz’s name like a lit stick of dynamite into the train car, “our old buddy, may he rest in peace, we’re all friends here!”

Tango forced a smile, “Sure, ‘Dubs.”

Bdubs sat back, satisfied with himself, and Tango leaned his head back against the seat.

He kept his eyes closed and pretended to sleep, taking in the snippets he could of the hushed conversation of his companions. He forced down the nausea that rose in him at the prospect of being on a train again.

At what he was about to *do*.

They weren’t going to stop the train, this time. They intended to rob it while it moved, then get off as it slowed into the station and run. They had horses stashed, waiting for them, at the corral in town, but he didn’t intend for Etho and Bdubs to make it that far.

When they nudged him, he pretended to wake, and let muscle memory carry him through the motions of robbery.

And then, when the pair of them were distracted in the luggage car, their backs turned to him for the first time in what felt like a century, Tango stepped backwards. And again. And again.

Through the door.

Etho looked up just in time to watch Tango throw it closed and lock it.

Tango stumbled back, across the connector, to the next car.

And then, because the hammering of Etho’s fist made even the metal of the door feel too flimsy for words, Tango laid down on the carpeted floor and hung his upper body out of the doorway, to the space between the carriages.

He twisted the locking mechanism on the latch, desperation pouring extra strength into his hands, and then yanked the connector pin loose.

For a moment, he watched the ground fly past him. At this speed, the tracks all blurred together, metal and wood and sand between all becoming a swirl of colors.

Then there were hands on his shoulders, pulling him back, and someone was thanking him, and Etho burst through the door of the drifting carriage in time for Tango to see the way his face had gone cold. He pointed at Tango, a silent promise.

Bdubs yanked Etho aside, already shouting his own, much louder promise. “You’re *dead*, you hear me?! You’re going to regret ever crawlin’ back up out of the dirt!”

Even as distance faded his voice, the words struck something terrified and vulnerable in Tango.

When they landed in town, he was off the train and hit the ground running.

He hadn’t stopped running since.

~

Now

Tango followed the sheriff out into the afternoon sun and thought to himself, *the Devil’s luck has struck again*.

Scar led them over to the saloon, where Jimmy-the-deputy was chatting with a tanned, strong looking gentleman with a very noticeable scar over one eye. His face seemed predisposed to smiling, and that seemed to be contagious, given the way Jimmy was grinning right back. Tango’s heart skipped a little at the sight, a sensation that he shoved as far to the back of his mind as he physically could.

“Hello, hello!” Scar called.

“Sheriff!” the man behind the bar called, and his voice seemed just as predisposed to laughter as his face did to smiling. “I’ve got your order here. Who’s your friend?”

Jimmy’s eyes were already boring into Tango. He took the offered seat between the sheriff and his deputy and tried not to look back.

He failed.

Warm, curious brown eyes looked down at him. The smile on his face hadn’t dimmed, but it had become a little confused.

You’ve met pretty men before, Tango chastised himself as nerves sparked under his skin.

“This here is Tango! Pearl shot him last night.”

“*Dios mio*, why?” the bartender demanded.

“All in the past!” Scar declared, “that’s all in the past. What matters is that Tango’s agreed to help me out in a couple of ways. First thing is he’s going to be doing some... hmmm, what would you call it, Tango?”

“Serving the community?” Tango suggested, picking a few words out of the waterfall of them that Scar had dropped on his head after Tango had agreed to his fool plan.

“Community service!” Scar crowed, “thank you,”

There was a stretch of silence, as Scar dug into the meal Jimmy had pushed over to him. Jimmy and the bartender seemed to be sharing a silent conversation. Tango felt Jimmy shrug next to him, but before either of them could speak, Scar cleared his throat. His eyes were focused somewhere back behind the bar as he continued.

“There’s something else, though,” he said. His voice was grave. Tango thought that you could have heard a feather hit the ground. Scar turned to Jimmy, and without a lick of excitement, said “Congratulations, Jimmy, you’ve been promoted.”

“Wh—what? Scar!” Jimmy said, flustered. Before he could protest, and before Tango could focus on the way a blush painted his cheeks, Scar continued.

“You’ve heard of the Bettermost gang,” he said, “Tango has it on *very* good authority that they’re weakened right now. I’m going to bring them down.”

Scar didn’t mention to Sausage or Jimmy that Etho posed a significant threat to Del Sombra, Tango noticed. He was pretty sure he hadn’t even meant to say that to *Tango*, but here he was, holding the knowledge of what Etho might be able to do to Del Sombra, if he were sufficiently pissed off.

Unfortunately for Del Sombra, if Tango was there, Etho would be *very* sufficiently pissed off.

“This means!” Scar continued over top of both Jimmy and the bartender’s very reasonable questions, “that Jimmy is now the interim sheriff of Del Sombra.”

“I’m really not qualified—”

“Pish tosh, you’ll do fine.”

“You’ve been spending altogether too much time with my brother.” Jimmy grumbled.

“No such thing,” Scar said, the cheer back in his voice, “now, get over here.” Scar scooped the last of his food into his mouth and wiped his hands on a napkin before he hopped to his feet. Reluctantly, Jimmy followed suit.

Jimmy looked downright *terrified* as Scar pulled the sheriff’s badge off his own vest and pinned it to Jimmy’s.

“There!” he said when he was finished. “It’s no proper ceremony, but it’ll do. Congratulations, James Ratcliffe, for becoming the first and only interim-sheriff to ever grace the streets of Del Sombra. You’ll want to start staying in town, at least for the first few days—transfers of power always leave people a little restless, you know—and everything you’ll need to know is somewhere on my, er, *your* desk.”

Tango thought back to the desk in the sheriff's office. It wasn't a bad size, but it had been swamped with a mess of paperwork. He didn't envy Jimmy.

"Now," Scar said, and if Tango squinted, he thought he could see a little bit of fray at the sides of Scar's veneer of calm, "I need to pack. Tango, I leave you in Jimmy's very capable and *very qualified* hands."

"Er... thanks." Tango said to Scar's back as he left with a hop, skip, and a wave goodbye.

Tango turned to look at Jimmy and the bartender. Jimmy was looking at the badge like it might bite him. The bartender looked like he was frozen to the spot. His hands trembled on the bartop.

"He can't just *leave*," the bartender said, ducking out from behind the counter and rushing after Scar. This display seemed to shock Jimmy out of his stupor.

"Everyone loves him here," Jimmy said, by way of awkward explanation. He craned his neck to look at the still-swinging batwing doors and sighed. "He's really turned this town around, from what everyone says. Anyway," he eyed Tango. For a moment, Tango expected to be given a lecture, tossed back in a cell, but instead, Jimmy shifted awkwardly from foot to foot. "Are you hungry?"

Slowly, Tango nodded. It seemed that even though he had every reason to, Jimmy wasn't about to hold his indiscretions over his head. He was going to let Scar's word be law, and Tango was *not* going to spend the night in a cell.

"Famished," he said honestly, and the moment for Jimmy to condemn him passed by, untaken and unacknowledged.

Jimmy nodded, seemingly grateful just for something to *do*.

As Jimmy went behind the bar, taking the place of the bartender, Tango felt a dangerous flutter of something like hope rise in him.

He tried to squash it, but it fluttered just out of reach, refusing to be killed.

Chapter End Notes

Sooooooooo about all that....

We're back up with Jimmy next chapter! So now y'all have the roster for everyone's POV's! It'll continue with this trio for the rest of the fic (sorry to everyone hoping for more answers from Grian lol)

Thanks again to the HSBB crew, and my artists [Hybbart](#) and [Foxyola](#)! I can't wait for everyone to see their pieces!

You can also come say hi to [me on tumblr](#)!

The Bullpen

Chapter Summary

Jimmy wakes up and he's still sheriff. Now, he has to start pretending that he knows what that means.

Chapter Notes

Jimmy's back! I love writing Jimmy's POV, he's so silly.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The door to the sheriff's office, with its little holding cell and a desk that Jimmy had never seen more than an inch of the surface of, creaked open. The tread on the floorboards was enough to wake him, enough to leave his head swimming between the dream that had caught him and the waking world.

For the bleary moment after removing his hat from where he'd settled it over his eyes, he thought he was back at sea. But then he blinked, and the walls resolved into plain old, stained pine; not shiplap. The cot he was laying on was also far better than the ship had offered—Grian had insisted on the next ship out, and that had meant crossing on a ship with skint accommodation—and as he returned to consciousness between one blink and the next, Jimmy remembered the night before.

There was a strangled noise, almost a laugh, as the intruder noticed him.

"Hey there, Deputy," Tango drawled at him, casual as anything. Something in his tone made Jimmy feel warm. *Not* something he wanted to examine while still laying down.

Jimmy swung himself up into a seated position, and placed his hat back on his head, where it belonged. His clothes all felt like they fit wrong, but that was what happened when you slept in daywear. Sleep still tugged at his extremities, cloying and soft and trying to lull him back, but he shook it off as he stood. He was tired, but he'd live. He'd lived on less.

"That's *interim sheriff* to you," he shot back at Tango, hoping the haughty way he tipped his hat back and smiled belied any potential bite his words could have carried.

Tango was leaning against the wall, next to one of the mirrors. His hands were shoved into his pockets, and the bandages on his neck were hidden behind a neckerchief that Jimmy thought he'd seen Beef wear a time or two. He didn't have a hat on, and his hair looked wild,

as though he hadn't bothered even pulling his fingers through it after waking up. Something itched at the back of Jimmy's mind. Something important.

"Beggin' your pardon, then," Tango's smile didn't falter. If anything, it got a little wider. "What are you doing in *there*?"

Jimmy looked down, at the cot he'd just been laying on, and finally, his tired brain registered that he was staring at Tango through the bars of the holding cell. A flush rose to his cheeks, and he coughed, taking a step away from the bed and into the doorway of the cell.

"I, uh, realized too late last night that I'd need a place to stay, too." Jimmy admitted.

"Doesn't the sheriff have a place nearby? Don't get me wrong, mind, that's by far the nicest cell *I've* been in, but surely you'll want to be staying somewhere else until Scar gets back?"

"You've got a point," Jimmy allowed, but something in him twisted unpleasantly at the idea of staying in Scar's home without the man's express permission. He was sure the invitation had been implicit, but Jimmy didn't do well with *implications*. He wandered over to the desk, where he'd laid Scar's spare gun belt—his now, officially *his* gun belt—and strapped it on. He could feel Tango's eyes on him, heavy, at the sight of the twin pistols.

"Guess I can't tease you about *that* anymore," he said, after a beat of swollen silence. Jimmy didn't know how to decode his tone, and his face held no answers, when Jimmy looked up. Was it fear that turned the end of his sentence into a question? Did he see Jimmy as a threat, now that he had a weapon at his hip? Did he think Jimmy was going to use them on him? Bizarrely, Jimmy hoped not. Outlaw or not, Jimmy didn't want Tango to see him any differently. Tango cleared his throat, shaking off whatever oddness remained in his voice, "do you know how to use them?"

"Not as well as Scar," he admitted, "but I've been getting better."

"Well," Tango said, and for a moment, Jimmy thought that would be the end of it. He rocked onto his heels, getting ready to pass Tango and go out into the town proper, when Tango added, "I'd love to see how they handle."

Jimmy felt his ears go warm. He wondered if Tango was still mocking him, holding out hope that he was rubbish with the firearms, but Jimmy saw only sincerity in the slight smile on his face.

"If we get some time, I'll show you," he said, trying not to make it sound like a promise. He cleared his throat and looked down at the slats on the floor. "Well, uh, I think I'll swing by the boarding house and pick up a room of my own."

Tango stepped aside to let him pass but stuck by him as he left the dark room and wandered into the gray sunshine that marked morning in Del Sombra. The houses stretched out below Jimmy's feet, and he knew that if he looked a little further north, he'd see the shadows dancing as the sun began her hike over the crest of the canyon. He knew it was just the specter of sleep lingering in his bones, but the shadows felt a little more present, today, a little more familiar where they settled across his shoulders. The whisper of the wind through the

spaces between the shops sounded more alive, like a woman's voice humming as she went about her day. He was put in mind, bizarrely, of Cleo, the woman who ran the general store.

He tipped his head back, listening to see if he could hear her singing being carried on the wind, but the more he tried to listen, the more ephemeral the song seemed to become.

After a moment, he shook off the strange sensation and set off towards the boarding house. One of the cats dashed past him, into the sheriff's office—looking for food, probably, Scar was always feeding them. He heard Tango jump, a sharp noise of surprise jolting from his lips as the cat startled him. Despite himself, Jimmy could feel a smile pulling at the corners of his mouth as Tango hurried to catch him.

"Hey," Tango began, as the bunkhouse came into view. He hesitated, then tried again, his voice far more nonchalant the second time around, with a forced cheer injected into the words, "Hey, I've got a question. Keepin' in mind, I'm not asking for any reasons that would get me in a scrape with you or Scar—" Jimmy turned, raising an eyebrow, and Tango ran a hand through his hair. Jimmy reassessed his earlier train of thought. Maybe Tango's hair looked like that *because* he'd been worrying at it. "When y'all brought me in, did you happen to find any weapons on me?"

A bell went off in Jimmy's head. He groaned.

"I'm so sorry, Tango, I don't know how I forgot. Your things are all back at the corral," Jimmy waved out in the general direction of the house. "I found your bags on Bullseye when I caught him, and Pearl disarmed you before we took you into town."

"Pearl?" Tango asked, his voice sharp. He sounded worried.

"Don't worry," Jimmy rushed to reassure him, "she's mindful of things like that. I'm sure your guns are still in perfect condition."

Tango's mouth thinned and his eyebrows became nearly a solid line, they furrowed so deeply.

"That's not what I'm worried about," he muttered, "and, uh, I'm not referring to guns. I *have* a gun, just one, in my saddlebag. Unloaded, obviously." Tango hastened, seemingly trying to reassure Jimmy. Tango, Jimmy noticed, was picking at his lower lip. "I'm sure it'll be fine," he muttered, just low enough that Jimmy wouldn't have heard if he'd been an inch further away.

"We'll head back to the corral and pick up your things," Jimmy promised, "let me just check with Beef on a room and we can get going."

Beef, thankfully, didn't tease Jimmy about the oversight, and just seemed happy to do business. He'd given Jimmy a discounted rate, though whether that was because he was interim sheriff or because Beef was just a nice guy, Jimmy wasn't sure. He hadn't called him out on it, but when Jimmy had tried to press, he'd found that Beef was practically a brick wall when it came to bargaining.

They emerged from the boarding house lobby just as the sun began to bleed over the rise properly, and Del Sombra shimmered to life.

“Morning, Jimmy!” a voice called to him. He felt a little of the exhaustion of the day fade as he saw Gem wave at him, a parcel under one arm. That was a little superpower of Gem’s, he’d noticed, the world was always a little brighter when she was around. “You’re here early,” she remarked.

“Morning, Gem,” Jimmy replied, grinning at the way her eyes lit up when she got close enough and caught sight of the star on his chest. “I stayed overnight. Gonna be doing that a fair bit, now.”

“Isn’t that something!” She said, sounding a bit strained in her excitement, “Scar made you sheriff while he’s gone, then?” Jimmy simultaneously regretted and rejoiced in the gossip mill that was Del Sombra. On the one hand, everyone already knew what had happened, but on the other hand, everyone already knew what happened, and he didn’t have to explain himself.

Either way, this was the question Jimmy had been dreading, because he’d seen the worry in Sausage’s eye last night, when Scar had said he was leaving, and he could see it now in the way Gem held her shoulders—almost right, but just this side of too tense.

“He’ll be back, Gem,” Jimmy said, trying to sound reassuring. “He left Jellie here and everything.”

Gem smiled at him, still strained, even though they all knew that Scar would never abandon his cat. She shook herself off, though, and turned to smile at Tango, her smile *almost* back to its full strength.

“I’m so sorry, I’m Gem,” she said, reaching out a hand. She sounded genuinely sorry at her lapse in manners. “I run the schoolhouse, here.”

“Tango,” he replied, taking her offered hand. He sounded stiff, not at all like the man who had joked about Jimmy sleeping in his own holding cell just a little earlier this morning. When Jimmy looked over, his face looked frozen in the facsimile of a smile and his eyes looked... anguished. “Pleasure to meet you,” Gem, thankfully, either didn’t notice, or didn’t want to point it out.

“Are you going to be playing deputy to Jimmy’s sheriff, then?”

Tango reeled back, clearly shocked. Jimmy supposed that made sense, given that hours ago, Scar had threatened to hang him for being a wanted man.

“I, uh,” he stammered, his voice a squeak, “I’m just doing a, uh, whatchamacallit—”

“Community service,” Jimmy put in, enjoying both not being the flustered one, for once, and the flush slowly spreading across Tango’s cheeks. He shoved the latter to the back of his mind.

“Yeah, that. I ain’t even close to qualified to do time as a deputy.”

“Can’t be qualified if you don’t learn! And what better way than from the man who had the job just before you?”

Tango was shaking his head before Gem even finished her sentence. Something a little sour and a little sad began to curl in Jimmy’s chest, before Tango spoke and it dissipated like smoke.

“Don’t get me wrong, it’s a right good job and all, and I’m sure there’s no one around better qualified to show me than Jimmy,” Tango said, shooting Jimmy a smile. He could have read those words as an insult to Del Sombra, saying that Jimmy was the best that they had because he was *all* that they had, but Tango didn’t know that. He didn’t know that there wasn’t an old deputy sitting on a rocking chair on his porch, smoking a pipe and waiting to shower Jimmy with his wisdom. Somehow, coming from Tango, not even Jimmy’s mind could ascribe that level of pessimism from the words. Especially not in the face of that smile.

Don’t do anything stupid, Jimmy reminded himself. He tried not to think about how much his inner voice sounded like Grian. *This man is a criminal, no matter how amiable he is. He doesn’t like you, and you shouldn’t like him.*

“–But,” Tango continued, “I never really saw myself as a bull, either.”

“What then?” Jimmy asked, despite himself. Tango looked at him, and Jimmy wondered if he’d overstepped, if the question wasn’t welcome.

“I...uh, always wanted to open up a shop with a couple buddies of mine. They’re, uh, gone, now.” Tango said, his voice a little choked. He glanced over at Jimmy, who tried to talk himself out of reaching out to place a comforting hand on Tango’s shoulder. He failed and didn’t mind failing. Tango smiled over at him, and continued, “But I’d still like to try and carry that out, someday.”

Somewhere along Tango’s explanation, Gem’s smile had softened into something genuine.

“That’s lovely, Tango,” he said, and distantly, he heard as Gem agreed.

Before he left, Jimmy had asked Scar, practically standing guard between Jumbles and the road out of Del Sombre, if Scar thought he could trust Tango. He remembered Scar looking to the gash of lamplight through the darkness, towards where Hermes was regaling Tango with his tall tales, and turned back to Jimmy as if he hadn’t a single doubt in the world.

“Probably not! But I think we’d better.”

Despite himself, Jimmy couldn’t help but feel for the man beside him.

He tried to hold onto his suspicion from the night before, but as he heard Gem take her leave and responded automatically in kind, all he could think of was the warmth of Tango’s shoulder under his hand, and the small, private way he’d smiled at Jimmy as he told what Jimmy *knew* was the truth.

Tango didn't speak for the first leg of their journey to the corral. They'd found Arrow and the cart with Cub, who had threatened to start charging Jimmy rent if he insisted on keeping his horse and cart outside, but even as Jimmy apologized, he noticed that Arrow's coat gleamed, and that she kept nosing at Cub's pockets, as if looking for something. He'd grinned at the doctor, but Cub had just leveled him with an even stare and told him not to let it happen again.

Jimmy wondered if being back on their cart was bringing up bad memories.

"So," Jimmy said, in case it was, "a shop, huh?"

Tango made a wordless noise somewhere between a laugh and acknowledgement. "Yeah," he said, "I never really wanted to be an outlaw." he said, settling back so that he was leaning on the seat of the wagon, looking backwards up at Jimmy. "Well, okay," he allowed, "as a kid, sure. You hear about robberies and shootouts, and people are all mythologizing it, right? So it sounds like it beats all, 'cause you haven't lived it."

"Sure," Jimmy said, remembering the stories he wasn't supposed to hear as a kid, blown up and out of proportion, and all wildly exciting. Stories of war, fought for all the wrong reasons, and criminals who vanished, never to be seen again.

"Right." Tango sounded satisfied, "I wanted to open up a shop with—with the boys who ended up being my first gang." Jimmy nodded. He'd seen Tango's posture go stiff when he'd seen the wanted ads that Scar had held up. He knew what it meant for an outlaw to change crews like that. "We'd build things and sell 'em or offer out our services as engineers-for-hire. They would've been..." he trailed off. "They were the brains of the operation, both of them. They would've changed the world."

Jimmy didn't know what to say. What cold comfort could he offer to that? He took the reins into one hand and reached out to put his hand on Tango's shoulder again. Tango stiffened. He had a moment of panic, where he wondered if he'd overstepped. How could he play it off? Did he give Tango's shoulder an awkward pat and then pretend that nothing had happened?

Then Tango relaxed under his fingers and leaned into his touch.

"You could—I mean only if you want to, obviously, but I'd like to hear more about them." Jimmy tried not to visibly wince at the words pouring from his mouth. Tango knocked his head against the bench, smiling at Jimmy again. Jimmy had to look away.

He pretended to correct Arrow's perfect route as an excuse to take his hand back, too. His fingers seemed to burn where he'd touched Tango.

"Oof," Tango said, crossing his arms behind his head. For some reason, Jimmy could only look at him in fits and starts, "where to start?"

By the time the corral came into view, familiar horses milling in the fenced yard, they'd moved from the topic of Tango's crew to his engineering specialties, and from there they'd wound their conversation to Del Sombra and Jimmy and his siblings. Jimmy had carefully dodged the question of why they were there earlier, but he could feel the way that Tango's gaze lingered when Jimmy pointedly avoided the topic.

Tango went quiet as Pearl came to meet them. Instead of walking alongside Jimmy, as he'd almost thought she might, she sped to the back of the cart and hopped in beside Tango.

Jimmy eyed her nervously for a moment, but had to turn his focus back to steering, so he could get the cart back by the house.

"Hullo," Pearl said, her voice a bit stiff, nervous.

"Howdy," Tango returned, and Jimmy could hear the lilt of confusion in his voice.

"I'm glad you're alright," she said, after a minute, "And I suppose I should apologize for shooting you."

"You... suppose?" there was a grin there now, one that Jimmy was becoming fearfully familiar with.

"It seems like the thing I ought to do," she confirmed, *sounding* apologetic as she spoke. "But I can't say I'm really all *that* sorry about it."

"Pearl!" Jimmy said, fully turning to face her. The cart shuddered to a stop as Jimmy stopped guiding Arrow. She glared over at him. There was a beat of shocked silence as Jimmy silently tried to urge Pearl to apologize, and Pearl tried to urge Jimmy to mind his own business.

The problem was, for the time being, Tango *was* Jimmy's business. Until they decided where and how he'd spend his time in Del Sombra, until Scar got back, Tango was in Jimmy's care, under *his* supervision, and fully, completely *his* business.

The silence was shattered as a strangled noise came from Tango and shook them out of their stalemate. Jimmy's breath caught in his chest, and time seemed to freeze around Jimmy as he took in the sight of Tango: his head thrown back to ease the passage of his laugh through his neck and past his lips, the sun glinted off his hair and lit the glimmers of orange in them ablaze, the way Tango had clapped a hand over his eyes to laugh, but left his mouth free so the sound could dance in the air.

The indignant breath Jimmy had taken to continue arguing with Pearl left Jimmy in a nearly inaudible squeak.

Tango's chest heaved as he fought for breath against his own laughter, but eventually it subsided from full on guffaws to giggles, and he swiped at the corners of his eyes, grinning from Pearl to Jimmy and back.

"Don't worry about it," he said, "in your place I'd have done the same."

“Oh good,” Pearl said, sounding surprised for a moment. Then her posture loosened. “Now that that’s sorted, I’ve got work to finish, since *someone* left us high and dry to go be all important in town.”

“What was I supposed to do?” Jimmy called after her, as she hopped out of the cart and walked back to where she’d been feeding the horses, “Say no?!”

Behind him, Tango giggled again. “Aw, man, you should’ve seen your *face*.”

Jimmy whirled on him, indignant.

“That’s it!” Tango beamed, and Jimmy felt his heart clunk a little at the sight. He shoved the feeling threatening to rise in him *thoroughly* down, where it could rot with all the other things that Jimmy didn’t care to examine too closely. “That’s the one!”

“I—wh—Tango!” Jimmy tried to sort through his thoughts fast enough to turn them into words. “She *shot* you! The least she could do is apologize for it!”

“Nah,” Tango said, “the least she could’ve done was nothing. Asides, she was shooting an intruder. A *thief*. You telling me you think she shouldn’t have?”

“Well, no,” Jimmy allowed. There was a part of him that was still dead proud of Pearl for both the shot and having the initiative to take it. “But it’s different.”

The moment he said it, he wished he hadn’t.

Tango cocked his head, intrigued. Jimmy felt his cheeks flush and turned to start Arrow moving again.

“How d’you mean?” Tango asked, when it was clear no clarification was going to be forthcoming.

How *did* he mean it? Jimmy didn’t quite know how to put to words the way that he was feeling, nevermind how hard he was currently trying to shove those emotions down into the churning pit in his gut that had formed over the past two years of running.

“You’re—” he began, trying to think of a way to put it. In the end, he drew a blank. “It’s just different,” he settled on.

“Just cause you know my name now, doesn’t mean I’m *not* the same person she had every reason to shoot,” Tango said slowly.

Jimmy knew that. Of course he knew that.

It still felt different.

He parked the cart and got to work unhitching Arrow. Behind him, the cart creaked, and then Tango was on her other side, helping Jimmy set her free of her harness and buckles and heavy saddle.

“Thank you,” Jimmy said as they took Arrow back to join the others. He didn’t know what he was thanking Tango for. The space to think? The help with his horse? Both?

All he knew was that he was grateful.

Tango knocked their shoulders together. Or, rather, he tried to. Jimmy’s superior height meant that Tango’s shoulder connected with his bicep, but Jimmy took it in the spirit Tango had meant.

“Anytime, bud.”

“Timmy!” Grian called, strolling out of the house and toward them. Jimmy spied the pencil behind his ear, and slung an arm around Tango’s shoulders, spinning him to point over to where *he* thought the barn ought to be.

“Picture it, Tango!” he said, as if this had been what they were discussing all along, “a shiny new barn right over there, in line with the corral.”

Behind him, Grian made a noise. Jimmy glanced back in time to catch the tail end of an eye roll.

“Uh, sure?” Tango said, baffled at this turn of events. He kept glancing up at Jimmy, who smiled at him encouragingly, “sounds nice.” Jimmy winked down at him.

“See Grian? Even our new friend here agrees with me.”

Grian scoffed. He crossed his arms and rolled back on his heels, his eyes darting between Tango and Jimmy, clearly looking for something. “You can help him build it, then,” he said at last, waving them off. “I’m guessing those are his bags on my table?”

“Who else would they belong to, Grian?” Jimmy asked. He used his grip on Tango’s shoulders to steer them towards the house, and abruptly realized just how familiar he was being with a man he’d barely known two days. He let his arm fall to the side and tried to give Tango an apologetic look, but Tango was staring at Grian. He looked like he was on the verge of saying something to him. Grian beat him to it.

“Say,” he began casually. His ‘casual’ tone was a constant red flag in Jimmy’s mind, a cue that their parents had never caught on to, but that Grian and Pearl had learned from Lizzie, and that Jimmy had learned to be wary of, “what did you tell the sheriff that got him out of here like a bat out of hell?”

The wariness left Jimmy in a rush. Scar was the only person Grian had gotten close to in town, as far as Jimmy could tell. It made sense that he’d want answers. Beside Jimmy, Tango went rigid. All the fear that Jimmy *had* been feeling, seemed to have gone to his companion.

“I warned him, is all. Now’s a better time than any to take out the rest of the Bettermost, and he wanted to be the one to bring them in.”

Grian’s eyes flashed behind his glasses, and he looked to Jimmy, who shrugged. He hadn’t been present for that conversation, though he’d been there for what came after. He couldn’t

maintain eye contact with Grian. He couldn't get the memory of the way Grian's face had shuttered when Jimmy had said that Scar would be heading out that same day. He'd tried to backtrack, say he didn't know for sure, but the damage had been done. He'd thought for sure that Grian would have heard it from Scar almost immediately, the two had gotten so close, but apparently that was not the case.

"Huh," was all Grian said in response. And then, "well, like I said. Your things are on the table."

Jimmy nodded toward the door. "You go on ahead, I'll grab Pearl and find out where she put your weapons."

Tango's shoulders sagged a little, and he gave Jimmy a relieved look. Jimmy fought back a pang of guilt. He hadn't been *lying*. It was perfectly normal for a person to have multiple reasons to do things, he reminded himself.

He led Arrow over to the corral, where he'd last seen Pearl, and spotted her almost immediately, wading through the herd to get to him.

"Well if it isn't Mr. Important himself," she teased, leaning over to hug him. It had been strange, he'd realized, to be so far from her and Grian the day before. They'd spent so long stuck at each other's sides and watching each other's backs that he couldn't stop worrying about them long enough to rest. Seeing them both, alive and (mostly) well, quieted that restless voice in the back of his head. He could leave, he realized suddenly. He could do his own thing, be his own man, and they would both be okay without him.

He swallowed hard. It seemed like a strange thing to have to realize, but he'd needed to see the proof of it with his own two eyes. They'd be safe without him.

It was almost an isolating thought, but there was a freedom in it, too.

"What's wrong, Jimbo?" she asked, taking in his expression.

"How's Grian doing?"

Pearl looked away and turned to Arrow, instead. "He's fine," she hedged. Her voice was clipped.

"Horseshit."

"Wh—" Pearl turned back to him, but whether she was shocked at his language or at the fact that he was arguing with her, he wasn't sure. "Well how *else* do you want me to respond? He's gutted? He's as fine as he *can* be, considering the circumstances? I heard him spend half the night packing and unpacking his suitcase?"

"That'd all be good to know, yeah." Jimmy confirmed. Pearl turned away from him, flinging her hands up in the air. "Especially the last bit, because I need to know if you're running again."

Pearl stiffened. When she turned back to him, it was slow, with a terror in her shoulders that he recognized and wished he hadn't put there. He didn't take the words back, though.

"*'You're'?*" she asked quietly, "It—it would be all of us, Jimmy."

And, look, maybe Jimmy hadn't meant to make the distinction. Maybe it'd been a slip of the tongue, or maybe, just maybe, he was sick of running from a threat that he didn't even know the name of. He shrugged at her.

"I don't see why it has to be," he said once his heart stopped clogging his throat. He could have taken it back, but that would have meant pretending everything was *fine*, and, he had to admit, he was exhausted just thinking about that. He had, he thought, hit his boiling point.

His voice, even to his ears, sounded airy and disinterested, despite the roiling emotions in his gut. He sounded like Grian used to, back when he cared more about believing in himself than racing halfway across the globe. Like Grian still did, sometimes, when he was dismissing Jimmy's worries and requests to be looped in. *You know everything you need to, Tim. Did you finish feeding the horses?*

"You'd be in just as much danger as we would be," she argued, bringing him out of his head. Her voice was snapping at the edges, and Jimmy *knew* that she was right, but—

"Now, see, I'm not so sure," he said before she could finish speaking. He was making a *point*, now. Because he'd had a suspicion, but had buried it under guilt and trust, and because he'd discovered that having a shiny piece of metal pinned to his chest made him feel more like himself than he'd felt in over two years.

He had people trusting in him. Relying on him. And it felt *miles* different than the crumbs that Pearl and Grian had been giving him for the past two years.

"What do you *mean*? You ran with us, as far as anyone knows, you're just as involved in this as we are!"

Jimmy went cold.

"And what is 'this' exactly?"

Pearl stopped looking at him. She was looking *close* to him, at something just beyond his right ear, but Jimmy could see the difference. He folded his arms and waited for her to lie to him. She glanced at him and Jimmy watched as whatever she had been about to say died on her lips.

"That's—the details don't matter."

"I really think they do, Pearl."

"I don't see why you care *now*!"

"I've cared the whole damn time," Jimmy was aware that his pitch was getting higher, but he hoped they were far enough away that his voice wouldn't carry. He didn't necessarily want to

air *all* of his family drama in front of Tango. “It’s not my fault that you two would rather lie to me—”

“Jim—”

“—than loop me in. Keeping me in the dark doesn’t *actually* help—”

“*Jimmy*—”

“—anyone, least of all me. If I don’t even know what the problem is, how am I supposed to help?” he demanded.

“Jimmy, *stop!*” Pearl begged, her eyes flicking from him to the house. Some of his anger fizzled away, and he realized that he’d gotten louder than he realized. He glanced back at the house, but luckily the doorway stayed empty. No Tango or Grian had come to investigate the ruckus. “Look, I *get* it, I do,” Jimmy felt his eye twitch. “Grian would be hiding it all from both of us, if—” she bit her tongue. Literally.

“If what?”

“Nothing,”

“If *what*, Pearl?”

Pearl spun away from him and marched away from the herd to an empty spot of grass. She crouched down and put her hands behind her head. Distantly, Jimmy could hear her breathing, ragged and upset.

The rest of his anger vanished in a flash, leaving a curl of guilt behind.

He dropped down on the ground in front of her, after taking a moment to glance down and make sure he wasn’t about to make even more of a fool of himself by sitting in a pile of horse manure.

“I would go with you,” Jimmy said, not entirely sure if it was the truth, “If I thought either of you would actually leave Del Sombra.”

Pearl let out a shaky noise that might have been a laugh or might have been a sob.

“We weren’t *lying*,” she said, her words slightly muffled by the fact that she had her face buried in her knees. “We just wanted to protect you.” Pearl propped her chin on her knees and poked the end of Jimmy’s nose, the way she’d done to him when they were kids and she wanted to make a point. “You’re our little brother. It’s our job to keep you safe.”

Jimmy could think of a hundred poisonous things to say to that. Instead, he batted her hand away, the way *he’d* done when they were kids, and tapped his newest accessory.

“And I’m the sheriff of Del Sombra. It’s my *job* to keep everyone in town safe. That includes both of you.”

Her lips twitched into an almost-smile. Jimmy sighed, resigned, and rolled over.

“I’ll drop it *for now*,” he said at last, a warning in his words. “But the second Grian gets squirrely for real, I need you to tell me everything.”

“I will.” She agreed, though Jimmy couldn’t help but wonder how much he actually believed her. When, he wondered, did it get so hard to trust his siblings?

He took a deep breath and let the question go.

“One more thing,” Jimmy said, and when she stiffened, he held up his hands in surrender, “completely unrelated,” he swore. “You took Tango’s weapons. Now that he’s not a prisoner anymore, those are his rightful property. He needs them back.”

Pearl made a face. “Are you sure?”

“Am I—Yes, I’m sure! I’m the *sheriff*, Pearl, I can’t condone theft.”

“Is it theft if I tell you that when I took them to False and asked her to look at them, she warned me to go out and bury them in the desert and forget where I’d put them?”

Jimmy was *baffled*, even as his heart sank. False was the town Blacksmith. He didn’t know her *too* well, he was far more acquainted with her partner, Stress, who worked as the town farrier. But he knew that False was capable, good with the very tools and weapons that she made, and had never, not once in the entire time they’d been there, lost her head about something.

“What?” he said, because it was all he could think *to* say. Then he realized that there was an even *bigger* question at play, here. “Did you?”

“... No,” Pearl admitted. “But it’s a strange thing for her to say, right?”

Jimmy couldn’t deny that even if he’d wanted to.

“Show them to me?” he asked, and Pearl sighed, finally getting up. She reached down and helped Jimmy to his feet, and Jimmy let her, even if they both knew he could do it on his own.

She took him around the back of the house, to where they kept the woodpile, and reached behind it. Jimmy made a face, trying hard not to think of all the spiders that had to be lurking back there.

Tango’s belt, when she retrieved it, still looked pristine, even if there was a cobweb hanging from it. He brushed it off as Pearl handed it over.

The leather was a deep red-brown, a color Jimmy didn’t think he’d ever seen before, and the etching on the leather was... strange. It seemed to shift as Jimmy looked at it, and if Jimmy didn’t think he knew better, he’d have thought that the images depicted were of devils dancing. He shook his head and turned his eyes to the weapons themselves. He couldn’t deny a chill of curiosity. There were two weapons, there, but as promised, they weren’t guns.

Jimmy pulled one of the silver handles free from the leather pouches hanging from the belt, and a wicked curved sickle emerged. The handle was cold in his palm, and Jimmy tried to chalk that up to being hidden in the shade behind the woodpile, but something in his brain itched at that explanation. The handle was embossed as well, images of vines and flowers that Jimmy didn't recognize curled around it, but despite that, it still managed to fit comfortably in Jimmy's hand. The blade was thin and sharp, and Jimmy thought that if he even *looked* at it wrong, it would cut him.

He looked at it wrong, and felt the air leave his lungs. He righted the blade quickly, and saw only his own eyes, staring back at him.

He could see why Pearl had gone to False. The craftsmanship was *extraordinary*.

"Well," he said, feeling a little breathless. What an outlaw would do with a weapon like this, Jimmy had no idea. It wasn't as versatile or even half as *practical* as a gun, but Jimmy supposed that wasn't his business. He put it back where it was meant to go, and stood, brushing the dirt from his knees.

When he looked back up at Pearl, she was biting her thumbnail, looking between Jimmy and the modified gun belt. He nodded at her because he didn't know what else to say. The gleam of the sun off the metal was caught in his mind's eye. He tried to shove past it, tried to shove away what he could have *sworn* he saw before his reflection settled, but he couldn't. It had shaken him to the core.

He'd seen Martyn Littlewood, one of his oldest, dearest, *dearest* friends, standing behind him. He didn't look anything like how Jimmy remembered him. He'd looked more travel-worn, with a hint of a beard on his chin and a suit that Jimmy didn't recognize. Not to say he would have recognized all of Martyn's suits or anything (sure, he could remember, in the privacy of his own mind, that he would know many of them by touch alone), but it was still remarkable in its strangeness. Even still, that hadn't been what had drawn Jimmy's eye. No, that had been the mechanical right hand that Martyn had been reaching out to Jimmy with.

Jimmy hadn't reacted at the sight, hadn't turned to look, if only just. He knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Martyn Littlewood was dead. That was the *only* thing he knew about the night that they'd fled London.

Now, as Jimmy stood, he let himself turn all the way around to check. He scanned the horizon, in case there was a way that Martyn had hidden himself, but even that proved fruitless. As he sighed and started walking to the front of the house so he could return the weapons Pearl had nearly buried in the desert, he found that there *was* a shadow of doubt in his heart.

After his conversation with Pearl, he found that he wasn't excited. He wasn't relieved at the thought that Martyn might be alive. Instead, the question echoed in every footstep, from London to Del Sombra:

If Grian had let him think Martyn was dead, had let Jimmy *mourn* him, what would it mean if Martyn was still very much alive?

Even if he was slowly running out of trust in his siblings to keep him in the loop, he did know that he believed Pearl when she said that they wanted to keep him safe.

As they rounded the front of the house, though, Jimmy thought that he could see a group of half-familiar silhouettes.

The sight of them made him understand Grian a little bit more, until he looked more closely and recognized some of the faces in the crowd. His fear left him in a rush, leaving only curiosity behind.

“Grian?” Jimmy called as he waited for his eyes to adjust to the lower light level in the house. Grian and Tango were at the table, and Tango was poring over the blueprints that Grian had cooked up for the barn. Tango’s fingers danced over a spare scrap of paper, and Jimmy realized that in his hand was the same pencil that Grian used for drafting.

Tango continued talking, only glancing up with a small grin of acknowledgement at Jimmy’s call, “—fire you’re worried about—Hi Jim!—then can I interest you in a little doohickey of my own devising?” He turned the paper around so Grian could see it and used the pencil to outline the mechanism that he’d drawn. “I’m sure you’ve heard of Parmelee’s sprinklers,” he continued, and Grian nodded, “this is *sort* of like that. I’ve made them *better*.”

Jimmy was frozen, still dizzy from the emotional whiplash of the afternoon. He found himself caught watching the curve of Tango’s smile and the energetic way that his hands seemed to dance in the air as he explained. A sharp stab of pain brought him out of his own head and back into reality.

“Oi!” he hissed. He turned and saw Pearl staring at him, flummoxed.

“Do I need to kick you twice?” she demanded, and then shoved past him without waiting for an answer. “Grian, the gents you hired are here.”

The first question that came to Jimmy was: gents?

The second, far more crucial question was: *hired*?

Grian hadn’t, in the entire time that they had been in America, hired *anyone* for *anything*. On several occasions, he’d insisted on doing something himself, or insisted they weather through an easily fixed problem to save the money. Grian had been insistent on saving as much as he could, in case they needed to run again. He’d been happy enough to pay for the little necessities, like clothes and food, without fuss, but anything beyond that seemed to terrify him.

“What?” he asked the room at large.

“Well, Grian said leveling Jimmy with a look, “since *someone* is going to be too busy to help us build anything, I needed to hire a crew to make sure it gets done before we’re eighty, didn’t I?”

Jimmy craned his neck to look at the encroaching throng of people.

Okay, so *throng* was a bit of a strong word, but given the number of people Grian had previously let onto the property was a whopping *one*, and now two with Tango, it sure did look like a throng.

Grian rolled up the plans and stuck them under his arm. He turned to Tango, something like a friendly expression on his face. It was guarded, though. Jimmy suspected it would stay guarded until Scar was back.

As if sensing Jimmy's train of thought, a familiar grey-and-white cat hopped up on the table, nosing up to Grian. Obliging, Grian reached out and gave Jellie a scratch on the chin. He didn't so much as pause, though, when he nodded to Tango and said,

"If you want to draw up a design and maybe put together a prototype, we can install it once we get the frame up."

Tango's eyes boggled.

"What, for real?" he asked, like he'd had no genuine expectation of Grian even being interested. Grian shrugged.

"Maybe you can talk to the sheriff over there—close your mouth, Tim, you'll catch flies—and see about that being your 'community service,' or whatever Scar called it."

Tango's face lit up, and his eyes shot to Jimmy, who felt, suddenly, like he was the sole focus of a searchlight. His mouth was very, very dry. His heart felt like it was racing, rabbit fast, in his chest. Against his express instructions, he felt a smile twitch into place on his lips.

With memories of Martyn bubbling so close to the surface, Jimmy finally recognized what was happening. This, he realized, was very, *very* bad.

Even knowing that, even remembering so clearly how much it had hurt when Martyn began to grow distant, intent on whatever research he was doing, even remembering the hollow way he had felt when he'd learned that Martyn was dead, Jimmy found himself nodding in the face of Tango's hopeful gaze.

Engineers-for-hire, he heard Tango saying. Jimmy had never met the other two members of Tango's original crew, but if he considered them the smart ones, they must have been brilliant. If Tango was going to change the world in their stead he'd need to start somewhere.

He should find a place to park Tango on the opposite side of town. With False, or Stress, or even Shelby. Keep him far from Jimmy, far from the way that Tango's smile seemed to lodge between his ribs.

Unfortunately, doing what they *should* had never really been a Ratcliffe family trait.

"That sounds reasonable enough." He agreed.

It was late afternoon by the time they got back to town, Jimmy again on Arrow, and Tango on one of the bay horses they had spare. Tango had stopped buzzing and gotten out of his head a little, the promise of his new project apparently enough to occupy his thoughts and his smiles the majority of the ride back. Not that Jimmy was jealous, of course.

Now that Jimmy'd put two and two together and gotten four, he could admit that while Tango looked good lounging on a cart, he looked even better on a horse. His position on the horse was perfect, and the gelding they'd chosen for him seemed to react to his orders before Tango even had to give them. Jimmy focused on his own posture but could feel a certain rigidity to his shoulders that wasn't normally there. Too much had happened over the course of the last two days for Jimmy to feel totally relaxed in his seat.

As much as Jimmy had been forcing his eyes away from Tango, Tango had apparently been watching *him*. He steered his horse closer.

"You ride like an Englishman," Tango said, hiding a smirk. Jimmy's face burned, and his instinct was to stiffen further, before he realized that that must be what Tango was referring to. He forced his shoulders to relax an inch or two and tried not to look too sheepish as he did it.

"*You* ride well," he countered, begging the heavens that it didn't sound as weird aloud as it did in his head.

"Surprised?"

"Not at all," Jimmy replied easily, "from what I've seen of you, you take to every situation well."

Tango's question had the underpinnings of a joke, and from his face, he hadn't been expecting Jimmy to be so sincere in his answer. Jimmy hadn't either, but it had been on his mind, and then on his lips, and then out in the air between them before he knew how to stop it.

"Well," Tango said, with a little laugh. Was it Jimmy's imagination, or did the laugh sound a little nervous? God above, he hoped not. The last thing he wanted to do was give Tango the wrong idea. Or, rather, the *right* idea if he weren't amenable to it. "You sure know how to flatter a guy."

Jimmy forced himself to stay upright in the saddle and not slide over sideways and under the horses hooves, so that he could avoid having this, or any other, conversation ever again. Instead, he forced a smile and turned as something caught his eye. At first, he would have sworn there were two figures in the distance, but when he looked again, it was only Scott. Good gracious but he was jumpy today. He raised his hand and waved at Scott as his friend came out of his shop, keys in hand to lock up for the night. Scott cocked an eyebrow and waved back at him. Jimmy was going to get asked about this, he knew for certain. He just counted himself lucky that Scott was discreet and wouldn't wander over and ask him about it *in front of Tango*.

“Y’know, if you need anything patched up, Scott’s the man to go to.” Jimmy said, desperately grasping at the change in subject. Had Scar already introduced him to everyone? Jimmy couldn’t remember. “He’s a real trick with a needle.”

“Sure,”

“And, uh, False is the blacksmith, in case your ‘*weaponry*’ ever needs a quick repair. She’s the best I’ve ever seen at what she does. Stress is the farrier, she’ll help you out if anything happens with your horse,” Jimmy continued, rattling off the members of the town. Slowly, Tango’s expression went from confused, to exasperated, to amused.

“I’m really feeling the love, man,” he said, when Jimmy was finished. “Here I am, thinking I’m something special, but turns out you talk about *everyone* like that.” He laughed, “My old buddy Skizz—he was with me when we joined Bettermost—was the same way.”

“Well,” Jimmy protested desperately, wondering how he could have overcorrected so drastically. The words had just kept pouring out of his mouth, no matter how he tried to get them to stop. “Not *everyone*,”

“Oh, no?”

“Grian’s a shit.” Jimmy said matter-of-factly.

Tango threw his head back and barked out a laugh. Jimmy liked his laugh. Oh God, *Jimmy liked his laugh*.

“But?” Tango prompted, when he had his breath back.

“But what?”

The lights of the saloon were in sight. Jimmy clicked his tongue, guiding his horse to the hitching post. They’d park up in the stable behind the boarding house, later.

“Grian’s a shit, *but*,” Tango prompted, “I think I’m getting the measure of you, now, and even when you’ve got a foul word to say about a man, you still seem to be willing to sing his praises.”

Jimmy sighed. Unfortunately, mad though he might get at Grian. Mad though he might *consistently be* at Grian, Jimmy couldn’t think the *worst* of him. A shadow rose at the back of his mind at the thought, and pointed an accusatory finger at him, but he shoved it aside as quick as he could.

“Grian’s a shit, *but*,” he repeated, “He’s loyal, and he’s careful, and he’s smart. Not just survival-smart, either. If we hadn’t had to leave, I think he might have been one of the greatest architects Europe has seen since John Wood.”

“Who’s John Wood?”

“No idea,” Jimmy declared, and added a little sheepishly, “It’s just something he used to say.”

Tango nodded, a contemplative look in his eye. Jimmy could feel the question hovering in the air between them. *Why did you leave?* The perpetual elephant in the room. After over a year, even Scott had stopped asking, but Tango was new, and Jimmy didn't want to admit how in the dark he really was.

The moment rolled past them. They hitched their horses, and by the time they pushed through the batwing doors and into the crush of people eating dinner inside the warmly lit room, Jimmy felt sure that Tango wasn't going to ask. Not now, certainly, and maybe, if he was lucky, never again.

After their meal, which they ate in relative silence, thanks to the weight of the day and the general subdued energy in the room (Jimmy pretended he couldn't feel the eyes on him, and Tango was clearly having to remind himself every second that those eyes *were* on Jimmy), they retired to the boarding house, where Beef handed Jimmy over a key and directions to the room he'd be staying in. Jimmy couldn't say he wasn't glad of the lapse in conversation. He was tired, and old ghosts kept trying to get his attention.

"Oh hey," Tango said brightly, his voice breaking through the grey of the silence between them. "We're neighbors!"

Jimmy checked the number on his key. Sure enough, he was in the room just beside Tango's. He couldn't help the smile that spread across his face even if he wanted to. "Sure enough," he said, and then, because he couldn't leave it *there*, he tipped his hat to Tango, feeling exhaustion pull at him. "See you bright and early, neighbor."

The flash of Tango's delighted half-laugh in response followed Jimmy into the room. Jimmy sighed, leaning against his door, and let the weight of the day crash down on him properly.

He sorted through everything that had happened, placing new realizations next to old suspicions and shoved everything about Tango into a previously unoccupied corner of his mind. There was... a surprising amount there. He flushed, realizing just how closely he'd been paying attention to Tango. He could pass it off to anyone else as being invested in his new role, in the well-being of the town and the man technically in his care, but he was too tired to make the lie stick in his own mind.

He stood, determined to pretend that he wasn't flustered, and looked around the room he'd been given.

The room was fairly small, sparsely furnished, as boarding rooms tended to be. There was a basin on the far wall from the door, where Beef routed the plumbing, and a window beside it. A wardrobe served to muffle any noise that might leak through the wall to his left, but the bed was pressed flush to the wall on the right. Jimmy realized, quite quickly, that Tango's room must be a mirror image to his own, because as he sat on the bed and leaned to pull off his boots, he could hear Tango doing the same.

He caught his thoughts before they could run away from him, but it was difficult, nearly impossible even, to keep himself from thinking that it felt a bit like they were climbing into opposite sides of the same bed.

Jimmy swallowed roughly, and hoped Tango couldn't hear it.

He forced himself through the motions of readying himself for bed and laid down, preparing himself for a full night of pretending that he couldn't hear every time Tango shifted beside him.

Despite his fears, he found that he slept almost soundly.

Almost, that is, until his subconscious woke him with a sharp thought: *Pearl's having the nightmare again.*

His hand reached out automatically to smack her awake from his position on the floor, because if he could wake her up before she started sleepwalking, he wouldn't have to try and haul her up over the side of the ship again.

His knuckles smacked sharply, not against Pearl's arm, but against a solid wood wall. The knock it produced was loud enough to wake him the rest of the way. Moonlight filtered through the window behind him, and he could still see his arm raised, the backs of his fingers pressed against the wooden wall.

Beside him, he could hear sharp breathing, ragged, painful sounding gasps. As he listened, the sounds muffled themselves. Jimmy could almost see Tango, his hand slapped over his mouth to quiet the breathing he couldn't stop.

Gingerly, Jimmy drew his fingers back and knocked again, on purpose this time. The resulting sound was softer, something ignorable, a question: *are you okay?*

After a moment, Tango knocked back, mimicking the pattern Jimmy had set. There was another, slightly louder *thunk* after, that Jimmy thought sounded like Tango resting his head against the wall.

Jimmy stayed awake, listening for another noise, another knock, the sound of footsteps, even, but instead he heard Tango settle back onto the mattress, the wooden frame squeaking as he settled.

Jimmy let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding.

He tried to search for that certainty he'd had earlier: Pearl was safe; they could stay safe without him. Instead, he found that he was worried not only about Pearl and Grian, but now about Tango, too. Whatever he'd been through, Jimmy knew it couldn't have made for an easy life, especially if it was the sort of thing that kept him up at night. No matter how easily Tango seemed to smile, or how readily he seemed to slot into Del Sombra, there were things that Jimmy didn't know, shadows there that he couldn't see.

By the time he fell asleep again, he'd thought up a hundred demons that Tango might be facing. None of them, he was sure, came close to the real thing.

The response to this fic has been above and beyond my greatest expectations, and I just need to take a moment to thank you all for reading, you're all wonderful! Thank you for reading and for commenting and being generally fantastic!

Another huge shout-out to my artists, [Hybbart](#) and [Foxyola!](#)

You can also come say hi to me over on [Tumblr](#) as well!

Two Aces, Two Eights

Chapter Summary

Scar begins his search, and tries too hard not to think of home.

Chapter Notes

Hoo boy, everyone, I'm sorry about how late this is! The writer's curse is real and it gave me Covid. I got laid out last week after I posted chapter 4, and haven't been able to move since. Finally feeling a bit more human, though, so here we go with chapter 5!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Scar, for all he loved Del Sombra, had missed the open road.

Okay, that was more or less a lie. The bugs, sun, and perpetual dust under his nails he could do without. He hadn't missed wondering where he'd lay his head when nightfall came, or worrying about the odd bandit in the brush, but he *had* missed the steadfast knowledge that if push came to shove, he had his wagon out back, and all his worldly possessions where they belonged: in a bag underneath his bed, ready to go at a moments' notice. What he'd missed, in all the nights safe and warm in his bed, in his four walls that only *sometimes* whispered the names of the damned at him, was the *idea* of being on the road.

And yet, now that he was here, all he wanted was to turn back. He missed his bed, and his people, and feeling warm at night. He missed the whispers on the wind, and the way that the shadows would reach for him. He'd gotten so used to the energy of Del Sombra that it had been a shock and a half to step beyond her borders and feel that *life* drop away. Scar couldn't explain it, but it felt almost like being the last person to leave a usually-crowded room. The last man watching the stage, even after the cleaners had come out to sweep, and the lights had been powered off. The echo of the performance remained, a presence at his side, reminding him of what was waiting when he got back, and what he had to miss until he *did* go back. On the lonely road, Scar's mind wandered, and he'd begun to suspect...

But that was silly.

Scar sighed, hopping off of Jumbles with a grimace. He led her a ways off the road, toward a low copse of scrub trees. He could see the remnants of a campsite there, and he didn't feel up to traveling more today. His leg twinged under his weight as he hitched her up and knew he'd made the right call. It had taken a lot to get used to knowing his new limitations, after his injury, but he'd managed it.

He stared down at the blackened twigs in what remained of the fire pit, feeling exhausted at the mere thought of starting a new fire.

He stared a bit longer than he needed to, his brain focused on the charred wood, and pretended he wasn't thinking about Grian's threat to follow him, if Scar had kissed him again.

And, as much as he tried to pretend otherwise, he missed a pair of obsidian eyes the most. And try to pretend, he did, because he was sure as a gun that wanting that out here, where there was only one thing a body could be sure was watching, would spell nothing good for either of them.

So, to keep his mind away from it, from the hum and pulse of magic cradled in his palm, where Grian had gripped his hand and, knowingly or not, given Scar the best possible reason to come back, he pretended that he hadn't. He pretended that he couldn't feel the sting of the Deal dancing between his fingers, looping around his wrist, and pointing him back home better than any map or compass could ever hope to. He told himself that when he got back all that would be left of the Ratcliffe family was a few dusty trinkets and Scar's shattered heart. He tried to prepare himself for the ~~unlikely possibility~~ *eventuality* that he would return and Keralis would come out of the booth at the station, his eyes bigger and sadder than Scar had ever seen them before, and be the bearer of bad news... that Jimmy had abandoned his post, that Pearl had sworn to write, and that Grian hadn't even looked back as he stepped off the platform and out of Scar's life.

Even as he tried his damndest to convince himself, a treacherous voice in Scar's head reminded him of one crucial detail: Grian had looked him in the eyes and made a *deal*. That meant something. Perhaps not where Grian had come from, but in Del Sombra, deals were a currency all their own.

Scar wished he'd forsaken the deal and kissed Grian again, instead. Then, at least, he'd have company on his fool's errand.

Then he dismissed that wish as the nonsense it was. He shuddered to think of Grian on this stretch of road.

In the morning, he tried not to let the hope entice him. He tried not to let what he wanted show too clearly on his face, or in his heart, because that was more dangerous than anything rogue bandits could come up with. *Especially* given the deals Scar usually made. Any weakness, any small hole in his defenses was something to exploit, Scar knew, and Grian was a giant, blazing weakness, directly over Scar's heart. He wouldn't let that endanger Del Sombra, and he sure as hell wouldn't let it endanger *Grian*.

He continued his journey, too focused on not thinking about everything he'd left behind to *not* think about what he'd left behind and saw a town shimmer into view on the horizon. He'd nearly made it the rest of the way to the main drag before his mind shook him out of his contemplative stupor and he focused on the people he could see in the town he knew to be New Hermiton.

He'd never been here before, though now he regretted it. He'd considered New Hermiton to be too small to entice him, back when he was still hitching Jumbles to his wagon and

bouncing around the continent, selling oil back to the snakes. Now, he saw that, small as it may have been, it was clearly a lovely little town filled with life.

He could see all the little ways that this town wasn't his Del Sombra—there was no rail line, for one—and the cadence of life was different. He'd seen a dog or two running around, but the stray cats he'd grown accustomed to were notably absent, as well. What he wouldn't give, in this moment, for a peaceful moment in his kitchen, Jellie on his lap and familiar footsteps climbing the stairs—

He let the thought trail off, squinting as he tried to make out where he would need to go to find the town hall. He ignored the crawling feeling of curious eyes on him. He'd long since left behind the canyons that Del Sombra backed up against, having traveled through rolling hills and flat, neverending plains of sagebrush and little shrub trees. Part of him couldn't help but feel exposed. The sun shone directly on him, beating down onto the canvas of his hat in a way that it never seemed to at home. Anyone could see him, out here. Anyone could recognize him.

A bead of sweat rolled down his back.

Ahead of him, a tall, grand looking building sat at the top of a hill, and Scar felt all of the breath in his lungs evaporate in a great rush of relief.

He'd bet his lucky pen that that was the town hall.

He urged Jumbles forward, feeling a pang of regret as he noticed the nervous way that he walked, as if sensing Scar's own trepidation. He was scaring his poor horse, and for what? He patted the little sorrel on the neck in apology and tried to get his emotions back under control.

Strangest still, he thought, as he dismounted his beloved horse and got his legs under him, was the way that his very steps seemed to fall more heavily as he walked. He had bad days in Del Sombra, but rarely bad enough that he needed to lean on his cane as heavily as this.

He'd have chalked it up to riding for so long, had it not been for the fact that, when he cast his mind back, it seemed to be the case throughout his journey. Even if the pain had increased, thanks to the time spent on horseback, his steps had not been half as light as they felt back at home.

As he walked inside, letting the blissfully cool shade of the marble building envelop him, he thought about flipping a coin. Heads, he went back at the end of all this, to whatever waited for him there. Tails, he kept moving, and would never have to find out if Del Sombra was able to stand in his absence; if whatever spell he had over the residents only lasted while he was there, and they'd all remember that he'd started their acquaintance a fraud; if his bout of sentimentality in saving the town was worth it...

If Grian would honor his side of the deal.

Naturally, the coin toss would have been futile, because the answer was that Grian or no Grian, Del Sombra was his home. Besides, the only coin he had in his pocket was a fake silver dollar with two heads, and that would defeat the purpose.

He knocked on the door to the mayor's office, and straightened to his full height as he heard footsteps behind it. He removed his hat, hoping he looked even slightly presentable (an older, vainer part of Scar shuddered to think that he hadn't even bothered finding a mirror, and yet was hoping to make a good impression on this man).

Before he could second-guess himself and turn to leave, go find a mirror or a better suit, or interrogate the populace of New Hermiton to figure out the best way to ingratiate himself to the mayor, the door to the office creaked open.

The man on the other side of the door wore a sharp suit, dyed arsenic-green, and *somehow* managed to still look respectable. Scar was slightly envious. If he'd ever tried that, he'd have been chased out of town for sure.

The gentleman looked at Scar, his eyes vaguely confused for a moment behind his wire-rimmed spectacles. His long, brown hair hung loose around his ears, a little wild, as though he'd had it tied back, but had gotten tired of it. He had a well-trimmed beard, and beneath it, Scar could see his lips moving as he thought, clearly trying to remember if he'd had any meetings for the day.

His eyes brightened, and he snapped his fingers. When he spoke, it was with a grin and a twang that Scar almost envied in its ability to disarm the listener.

"Sheriff Goodfellow, was it?" Mayor Hills asked, his grin infectious. Scar only barely caught himself before he slid into a neighbor to the man's accent. He reminded himself that he didn't need a con or a cover story, because for once, he was presenting a solid image: himself. He shook the offered hand with a grim smile of his own.

"Thank you for taking the time to meet with me, Mr. Mayor," Scar said, both apology and request in one. He was aware of how disruptive his sudden appearance must have been, though he'd had Mumbo send a wire to New Hermiton the day he left. That had been... one week ago? Two? The days on the road all seemed to blur. He wasn't surprised that Mayor Hills had needed a moment to place him.

At the back of his mind, an old, buried part of himself wondered why he hadn't gone with *mayor* over *sheriff* of Del Sombra. He wouldn't be in this mess if he'd just been the *mayor*. Mayors weren't expected to up and leave the town to go be big damn heroes and save the day.

He'd been in a bit of a state when he'd realized that the townsfolk that remained were looking to *him* for guidance, and the death of the sheriff was still fresh in his mind. It had been the work of the town needing *something*, and Scar taking up the only role he could think of at the time. Simple as anything when he thought about it.

Plus, it came with the added bonus of knowing that he could shove all the important paperwork to the side and hope that someone else got to it, once he had someone else *to* get to it.

"You know," Mayor Hills began, his voice a little hesitant, "when I'd heard that the sheriff of Del Sombra was coming my way, I thought for sure—well, I've got a good friend who left

New Hermiton for Del Sombra a little over two years ago. She was the marshal here.” He sounded almost apologetic at not expecting *Scar* when he opened the door.

Scar read between the lines. If she’d been marshal in New Hermiton, it would make sense that she would end up being sheriff of Del Sombra. Scar felt his face freeze in a rictus imitation of the smile he’d just been wearing.

A familiar fear, borne of counting and naming the dead, rose in him. The plague that had swept through Del Sombra was no secret, and the question in Mayor Hills’s eyes was one that he was unsure that he wanted to ask aloud. His friend *hadn’t* been sheriff when Scar had arrived, and clearly wasn’t now. Both sheriff and deputy when Scar had first rolled into town had been rather burly men. The sort who were strong enough that it had been thought that they’d be able to fight off the pox, even if they did catch it.

“What’s her name?” Scar asked, when the silence stretched nearly to snapping. He could feel the list of the dead itching at the back of his mind, ready for him to search through. He didn’t want his first conversation with this man to be Scar breaking such grim news, but he knew neither of them would be able to move onto other subjects without breaking through this first.

For a moment, it didn’t look like Mayor Hills would answer. His throat worked around the great lump of fear that he’d been swallowing. For a moment, Scar didn’t see the mayor. He just saw the man in the suit, desperate for news of his friend. “Cleo,” Mayor Hills said, at last. “Cleo Bowden.” Scar felt the tension of the moment leave his body in one great rush. The first genuine smile he’d worn for days broke across his face without his input.

“Well, I’ll be,” he said, relief filling him near to bursting, “I never knew our Cleo’d been a marshal.”

Mayor Hills’s face lit up, his stiff posture relaxing almost instantly. “She made it to town, then?”

“And then some. She runs the general store and works closely with the operator of our boarding house, as well.” Scar was happy to talk, now that he knew he wasn’t the bearer of *worse* news than he’d already come with, and the amused twinkle in Mayor Hills’s eye said that it showed.

“How about your postman?” the mayor asked, drily, and Scar had a brief, shocking moment of clarity. He was vaguely aware that there were bags of mail that were brought in on the train. He was vaguely aware that in the days before the pox hit, there had been a little man in uniform bringing folks their telegrams and letters. He was vaguely aware of a building beside the boarding house, and a conversation with Beef at one point in time, when he was settling in and *everyone* had been having little conversations with him, that had to do with the postman. The postman who had stolen a horse off of Señora Ramos and hadn’t been seen again.

Del Sombra didn’t *have* a postman.

Scar groaned.

“I’m afraid that’s my oversight, Mr. Mayor,” he explained, “I’ve been working hard to get our little town back up and running, and for some reason, the matter of the mail seems to have slipped my mind. Our banker sends wires for us, since he’s hooked up to the telegraph line, but that’s more an unofficial thing.” The Mayor, to Scar’s relief, did not immediately round on him as a conman and a fraud, but instead gestured for Scar to precede him into his office.

“Well, at least I know she hasn’t been ignoring my letters on purpose,” he said brightly, taking the news in stride. “Now that the personal matters are out of the way, shall we talk business?”

Scar, for the first time of what he was sure would be *several* explained the mission he was on. Searching for sightings of the final two members of the Bettermost gang.

Mayor Hills—Joe, he’d insisted on being called, after Scar had apparently used his title one too many times—merely shook his head.

“We haven’t heard anything of them here,” he admitted, sounding genuinely apologetic. “Rumors have it the ladies in La Belle have had some bandit activity, but I couldn’t tell you if it was Bettermost or any of the other ruffians about. I’ve also heard that the rail line in Lonesome Hill was out of commission for a while, thanks to an attempted robbery.”

Something there struck a chord in Scar’s memory. Lonesome Hill and La Belle were neighbor cities, and they tended to work in tandem on certain issues. He’d avoided La Belle the last time he was in the area, because the mine had collapsed, and even *he* wasn’t heartless enough to try and make a quick buck off of the grieving. Lonesome Hill had been fair game... up until he’d had to shimmy down a drain pipe because the men he’d been playing Faro with had finally cottoned on to the fact that he was using more than luck to beat them.

He didn’t *think* he’d made enough of a splash to be on a poster in Lonesome Hill, but he also looked a fair shake different than he had back then. That, his name, and his title as sheriff would have to be enough to carry him through.

The sun was still high enough in the sky that he couldn’t condone staying the night in town, no matter how much he may have wanted to impose on Joe’s hospitality, so he’d left with an agreement that he’d get the town a postman just as soon as he was back in town to do it.

As he mounted Jumbles again, he tried not to let his mind linger behind him, no matter how much he may have wanted to.

He also tried not to think about how much he was going to hate the idea of being in a saddle at the end of this journey. At that, he failed. Jumbles was a sedate stallion, one that he figured anyone could have ridden, with a smooth gait and an easy stride, but even so, he knew that several days of riding would wear even more on his already bad leg. He did not relish the idea. The sooner he could catch up to Bettermost and outwit them, the better.

He just hoped that by the time he reached the bandits, he’d have a better plan than “identify them, survive the encounter somehow, get them in front of a judge and let them be *his* problem.”

Scar tried to settle for the night as far from a crossroads as he could manage. He made camp, started a little fire to keep any coyotes or snakes at bay, and settled in for another bland meal. He could stretch road rations an astronomical amount, but that had more to do with not wanting to eat them than it did with him being good at it. Still, as he tucked into the hardtack and boiled rabbit stew that would make up his meals for the next few days, he found that he wasn't alone.

Across the flames, Scar saw a familiar figure.

He didn't startle as the man appeared, didn't show any outward fear or confusion. To be honest, he was surprised he'd been allowed this far without a visit.

The man's slicked back hair showed off a high forehead and sharp cheekbones. He set a wide-brimmed hat on his knee and surveyed Scar curiously. His eyes were the color of the embers flickering up into the night air around them. When he smiled at Scar, it was the same smile Scar wore whenever he wanted to ingratiate himself to someone. Scar put his food aside, very aware that he was going to need every ounce of his wits about him for this conversation.

Del Sombra was counting on him.

Tango was counting on him.

He pulled a fresh bowl, tin instead of wood, from his bag and filled it. He passed it over to his oldest friend and sat back down. When he was sure that his voice would be steady and pleasant, he spoke.

"Good evening, Nick. I trust the road has been treating you well?"

Nick, of course, was not his name, but instead a handy play at familiarity that he knew both grated on and intrigued the entity sitting across the fire from him. Scar had a book of names that used to burn a hole in the bottom of his bag, ready for the spaces between towns to help him craft names and identities whenever he needed them. He had pulled one such name, one of his oldest, out of his book when he'd first met Nick, and had stuck to it ever since, if only to see the way his eyes would narrow in confusion, looking for the joke at his expense.

"It is long as ever," Nick replied, sounding amused, "though why you insist on these pleasantries every time we speak, I'll never know."

"Pshaw," Scar waved at the air in front of his face, as if clearing away smoke, or the words themselves. "I'm just making conversation. It's only polite. Perfectly human thing to do."

"Hmm," Nick said. The silence returned, as it always did. His own little answer couched in the sound of crickets and wind in the leaves above: I am not human.

Scar picked up his food and finished eating. The hardtack and stew tasted better now, tinged with the ever-present fear in these moments that this meal would be his last. He set the bowl

aside again when he was finished and waited. He wouldn't break the silence again. That need for the silence to be filled was how he unsettled folks. How he got them. It was a trick Scar himself had utilized. A good tradesman knew that silence had two uses: to be filled so fast the other party doesn't have time to remember how to extricate themselves from it; and to sit, heavy and uncomfortable, depending on the situation.

"Are you unsatisfied?" Nick asked, at length. He held the tin bowl in his hand, as if it weren't hot enough to melt the skin on his palms. "I never imagined seeing you outside the bounds of your little kingdom again."

"Oh, you know how I can be," Scar said, a non-answer. If he said he was unsatisfied, another deal would be offered. If he said he *was*, Nick would know something was wrong. "Some nights the stars just call to a man."

"Is that so?"

"You can't tell me you've never taken the time to look at them," Scar admonished, "I won't believe you."

"I don't make a habit of looking toward something I can't reach." Nick's tone was as cold as farmland in an icy spring.

Two separate bells went off in Scar's mind. The first, a warning: do not press further. The second, a realization: Nick had just lied to him.

Scar filed away the bargaining chip, such as it was, for later. He had a small pile of them, lies he'd been told by the Devil himself, things he could use in his eventual final deal, or, at least, to get out of his most desperate one. This, that Nick stargazed, was his most benign, and potentially most useful, bargaining chip to date.

"Del Sombra is recovering quite nicely," Nick said, after a moment. "Her luck really does appear to be changing." The words were pleased, proud, and across the flames, Scar could see a smile curling like smoke, pulling *just* too far at the corners of his mouth.

"Well, I'd never expected anything less," Scar replied, "you've never been one to renege on a deal. The silver in the mines was a lovely touch. As was the brimstone when tunnels get too dangerous. I've never seen a faster evacuation."

The smile vanished.

"I may never renege on my deals," he said, what Scar could *almost* call a grumble in his tone, "but *you* are never one to leave a gap in a contract."

"Well, aren't you a flatterer."

Nick glared at him. This would have struck any other man stone-dead, but Scar had been dealing with Nick since he was fifteen. Over a decade of deals had made him nearly impossible to scare, and he'd *always* been good with loopholes. It was a matter of noticing

the little details and making sure that no matter which way you looked at things from, there wasn't a single dropped stitch in the knitting.

He knew that calling him a flatterer was playing with fire. Nick had *tried* flattery with Scar, once, and Scar had left him convinced that he had traded his heart away to some other entity in exchange for something more useful. Nick had spent three subsequent deals dropping names of what Scar had been certain were myths, trying to determine who had gotten to him first. Scar could never let him know the truth: he was just careful never to fall for anything that sounded too good to be true. Love, he'd thought for eons, was just the ultimate scam. It couldn't be touched, or held, or *given*, no matter what flowery promises someone made.

Well. The promises he'd fallen for had certainly been far from flowery. In fact, Scar was pretty sure that the only thing that Grian had ever promised him was that he would be gone by morning, and that promise had always been broken.

He hid Grian's name in the back of his mind, as far behind every other piece of clutter in there as he could. He knew Nick couldn't read his thoughts, but Scar *did* know that if he ever found out, no force on Heaven or Earth could properly protect Grian from him.

"Interesting that you would leave your town unprotected," Nick said. Scar didn't call him on the obviousness with which he changed tack.

"Del Sombra is never without protection," Scar said, his voice smooth. Even so, he couldn't stop the way his eyes hardened. The threat was nothing, of course, but it was still *present*. "I don't overlook important details like that, remember?"

"Ah yes, your doctor," Nick scoffed, "though what protection a medical man could provide, I'm sure I don't know."

Scar let that one roll off his shoulders. Cub would never forgive him for trying to fight a battle for him, even against an opponent like *this* one. Besides, being underestimated was one of Cub's strongest advantages.

"Not just him," Scar pointed out, "I've left a sheriff behind as well."

He'd read and reread the contract before he left, and while there was no *direct* mention of Del Sombra needing a sheriff to pull upon certain... protections Scar had in place, he wasn't about to leave any room for doubt.

Nick sighed, clearly noting the care Scar had taken before he left. "And what of you?" he asked, his eyes burning bright, now. "Your little domain is protected even in your absence, *ad infinitum*," he drawled, the Latin burned like ice on the back of Scar's neck, the same way they'd done when Scar had insisted they be added to the contract. "But the open road is dangerous. Highwaymen abound. There are others who work for me, who might see the aura about you and think that you've used too much of someone else's rope."

Scar felt his mouth go wide. It wasn't a grimace, and it wasn't a smile, but he knew that if anyone else had seen it, they'd mark him as a madman.

“Well, seeing as I’m only *traveling*, I still live in Del Sombra. It’s where I call home. It’s where I work. It’s where I keep my *cat*,” he leaned forward. He could feel the heat of the flames on his face now, uncomfortably warm, but he didn’t show any discomfort. “and as a *resident* of Del Sombra,” he continued, slowly enough that he could see the moment that the Devil recognized the language he was using. He couldn’t *quite* keep the pride from his voice as he recited a specific bit of the contract, “I am protected.”

When Nick spoke again, it was as though he were doing so around a mouthful of stones.

“So you are,” he conceded.

He didn’t stand, the same way he hadn’t *sat*, but Scar was very suddenly aware that he was looking at a pair of well-tailored trousers. Between one flicker of the flames and the next, even that was gone, leaving only a whisper on the air.

For now.

Scar shivered.

“Quite rude to leave without saying goodbye,” he shouted, to no one. “You didn’t even eat your stew!”

Though, to be honest, Scar didn’t much begrudge him *that* one.

He didn’t sleep that night, try though he might. He kept waiting for the feeling of red eyes on him, or that of a knife plunging into his chest. He laid on his hen skins, his eyes closed, and waited until the light beyond them changed to dawn. Then he broke down his little camp, kicked dirt over the coals of his fire, and kept moving.

It took several hours of riding and turning the encounter over in his mind for him to put his finger on one of the things that had bothered him. Nick had never referred to Scar’s town as its own *entity* before. Scar had, on many occasions, said that Del Sombra was the only woman for him, referring to her as his bride to explain how much he worked, or to keep some of the pushier denizens off of his back. This was the first time that anyone else had referred to her as such.

He didn’t know if it meant something, but he *did* know that it was strange enough to note.

~

It took him three more weeks, and three other little towns, to reach La Belle. He almost rode straight on to Lonesome Hill, knowing how close he was, but that morning he weighed the decision. He sat in his camp for a few minutes longer and unpacked his cards. It was as much tradition as it was necessity, by this point. He only asked one question, the same way he’d done for the first four hundred days in Del Sombra.

Where do I need to be?

The Heirophant, reversed.

Freedom, he thought. *Changing the status quo*.

He tried not to laugh. No description could fit better than that for La Belle.

The first thing to greet him as he rode into town was the gallows. It was an obviously new structure. It hadn't even stood long enough for the sun to bleach the color from the wood, or the life from the heavy woven rope slung over the top beam.

As he made his way further into town, he saw evidence, not just of the bandit attack he'd heard so much about, but of a full blown firefight. Entire panels of wood had been torn free of the sides of houses and replaced, the new stain standing out in stark contrast to the old. Houses that had taken too much damage were in the process of being torn down and rebuilt, and as Scar passed the little half-finished church, he saw that the graveyard beside it had been given fresh attention.

Every step Jumbles took into the town, Scar was met with the wary stares of the women who were the ones doing all the work.

One girl, her hair nearly as blonde as the gold people had come to La Belle for in the first place, rushed away from her work nearly the moment she saw him.

A few minutes later, a figure exited one of the houses and stood in the middle of the road, patiently waiting for Scar to reach her.

The first thing he saw about her was the leather duster she wore, black as pitch. It did a mighty fine job of camouflaging the gun at her hip, but Scar had spent too many years looking for concealed weapons to be fooled.

She stared him down with her one good eye, and, far away as he was, Scar let himself glance at the eyepatch she wore on the other one. The bright pink heart in the middle was a surprise, a single splash of color in the midst of the all-black ensemble and was clearly meant to draw the eye to it, either as a reminder: *I've been through worse than you can put me through*, or to unsettle those with weaker constitutions.

Then again, maybe it was just because it looked cute.

For a moment, as he got closer, he wondered if she was like him, given he would have *sworn* he'd seen Nick wearing those boots at some point in the past, but as he swung himself out of the saddle a few feet away from her, he realized that there were no damned souls in the pattern on the leather. Just a coincidence.

Scar, unlike many people, *did* believe in coincidence. There were too many things happening all the time for him not to. Coincidence happened in small moments, small things. It was the big stuff that he needed to watch out for: Wanted posters for presumably dead men, a plague of smallpox that ravaged a town three days after he came around, swearing that he had the one and only cure for it, that sort of thing.

"Morning, ma'am," Scar said, offering her his hand. For all she clearly had reason to mistrust strangers riding into town, she took his hand. Her grip was tight enough that Scar could easily

read it as a threat, the way he was sure she intended. “Scar Goodfellow, Sheriff of Del Sombra.”

For the first time, she smiled. Her shoulders didn’t entirely relax, and her mouth didn’t entirely *smile*, but he could see it in the tilt of her lips and the crinkle at the corner of her good eye. Most importantly, she loosened her grip from *painful* to *firm*.

“Katherine Ashdown,” she greeted, “Sheriff of La Belle.”

An arm slung around Katherine’s shoulders, and she released Scar’s hand to keep her balance, or at least avoid making him stumble with her. Scar shielded his surprise when he realized the newcomer was a man.

“Don’t forget Mayor, Kitty,” he drawled. He reached out the hand not currently curled protectively around Katherine’s shoulder and gave Scar a dispirited handshake. Scar didn’t know if he’d ever seen a smile that was so obviously friendly while also being deeply threatening. “Joey. My friends call me—”

“Oh, yes.” Katherine interrupted, “Well, Mayor, I mean, that’s rather... recent, actually.” She shrugged Joey’s arm off of her shoulders. Scar squinted at Joey, then glanced at Katherine.

“You seem... familiar, Joey. Have we met before?”

“We have *not!*” Joey sounded delighted at the prospect. “You’re probably recognizing me from my posters. I’m *rather* famous in these parts.”

“Joey—” Katherine hissed, trying to stop him, but Scar had already made the connection. She winced as Scar’s eyebrow went up.

Scar had several wanted posters in his office. Some newer, some older. Some requesting the bounties alive, some dead, some either.

As Scar recalled, Joey was wanted *dead*.

Katherine looked about as tense as she had when he’d first rode in. Scar made a decision.

“Well, I’m sure I’ll figure it out,” he lied.

Katherine, he realized, was a terrible liar. All of the air in her lungs seemed to leave her lungs in a relieved huff of breath.

“In the meantime, what can I help you with?”

“I’m looking for a couple folks,” Scar admitted, reaching for the posters in his saddlebags, he unrolled them. If he was on the right trail, which he suspected he was, he would get his answer soon enough. He watched Katherine’s face carefully as he held them out and continued, “specifically, the last two members of the Bettermost gang.”

Joey glanced down at the papers that a frozen Katherine was holding. And then he looked again, reaching down to snatch one of them out of her hand.

“That’s the guy who stole my horse!” he exclaimed, indignant, “they didn’t even *need* a horse!”

Katherine had straightened and schooled her face into a careful expression, but fire danced in her dark eyes. She glanced around, noticing all at once the folks who had been pretending not to eavesdrop.

“You’d better come with me,” she said, snatching the paper back from Joey, “*you* go... I don’t know. Help Eloise with something.”

“Aye aye, *Capitan du mon Coeur*,” Joey said, with a flourish and a bow. Katherine paused for a second but settled for waving him off sharply.

Scar handed Jumbles off to the same blonde girl who had raced to Katherine like the devil was at her heels—Eloise, presumably—and followed Katherine into one of the few buildings that still had impromptu windows. Light streamed in through various circular holes in the walls, and one of the wooden planks on the side had been completely removed. Its replacement was leaning on the wall beside the hole in the wall. Scar figured he only really needed one guess to figure out what she’d been doing when she’d been summoned to talk to him.

Aside from the chair and the desk in the office, both of which were sporting their own new ventilation, there was no other furniture in the room. Scar had a feeling that everything else had been too trashed to save. He steeled himself to stand for as long as this conversation took. He was glad he’d had the foresight to grab his cane before he’d dismounted Jumbles. Katherine stared at the papers again for a long moment and then exhaled through her nose.

“I have good news and bad news,” she said, her eye piercing through Scar, “the good news is I’ve seen your men, and recently.”

Scar didn’t like where this was going if that was the *good* news. He’d guessed that the men calling themselves Etho and Bdubs were the ones who had raided La Belle, but since he’d gotten here, he’d had a growing sense of unease. It was sky-high now.

“And the bad news?” he prompted; certain he sounded as wary as he felt.

“They’re not calling themselves ‘Bettermost’ anymore.” Her mouth twisted into something angry. “In fact, they’re not on their own at all—”

Don’t say it, Scar begged her silently. Something about the air around him was suddenly hot, oppressive. Pearl’s voice, of all people, rose in his memory. *Don’t finish that sentence the way I think you’re going to.*

“—They’re running with the Red Hand gang.”

Scar closed his eyes, sending a prayer whichever way it was going to go.

So much for taking them out while they were vulnerable. He held out his hand for the posters. Katherine raised an eyebrow at whatever she saw on his face.

“Are you going to go after them anyway?”

“I shouldn’t,” Scar said, hearing the cheer in his voice. Part of him wondered how it had gotten there, the rest of him knew that it was something he fell back on, when it seemed like things weren’t going his way. Unfortunately for him, that happened far more often than not. He tucked the papers in his pocket, feeling a sense of déjà vu threatening to swallow him as he did so. “But I’ve come this far.”

“If you do catch up to them,” Katherine said darkly, “give that blond fellow one between the eyes for me.”

Scar took in her expression, the miasma of grief and rage that lingered around her. She’d go with him, if he gave her the opportunity. He could offer her revenge, and she would take it. She was fidgeting with the end of her braid, now, and he could see matching hearts embroidered on the black ribbon she tied it with. Revenge, he thought, was something she’d take for her people, but was not something she wanted for herself. She was a protector, and she belonged in La Belle.

He glanced out the makeshift window that the missing board provided. He could see Joey and Eloise repairing a building not too far away. Eloise was hammering a panel into place, while Joey used his own weight to hold it there, hands waving as he gestured while he talked.

Closer, he could see the rigid spine of someone who was clearly pretending to work. Their hands were still, and their head turned to listen to the conversation happening in the sheriff’s office. Scar hid a smile and inwardly wished that he were the stone-hearted bastard that Nick and many of his previous *acquaintances* believed him to be.

“Why don’t you give me an idea of what I’m going up against,” he said, “so I can know just how bad an idea this is.”

Katherine’s eyes darted past him, through the gap in the wall.

“They were looking for someone. They’d heard about...” she glanced back at Scar, who plastered an innocent look back on his face just in time. “They thought that Joey might be someone else. Someone they called ‘Tango,’” her shoulders slumped, “when I wouldn’t give Joey up, they started shooting. When they saw that Joey wasn’t who they wanted, they tried to kill him for wasting their time.”

“Obviously, that didn’t work,” Scar pointed out. Katherine’s half-defeated look took on a vicious tinge as she smiled, clearly proud.

“*Obviously*,” she said, sounding, for the first time, like she wasn’t putting on a façade. She tossed her braid back over her shoulder and relaxed. “La Belle is better than anyone gives us credit for.”

“So, who am I looking for?”

“You’ve got two of them there in your pocket, and I’m sure you’ve seen Ren’s poster,” she waited a moment for confirmation, and Scar nodded, leaning back against the wall as his leg

began to twinge. Luckily, it held beneath his weight. “there’ve been a few other changes, though. First off, he’s missing a man. One of the cronies, a man called Joel, either kicked it or ran out on him, not sure which.”

“Something tells me you’re about to say not to let that get my hopes up.”

“One of his *other* men moved up ranks, and I mean *shot* up the ranks.”

Scar wasn’t sure if he wanted to know if that was a play on words. “Did he kill that Joel guy, or what?”

“That’s what they say but,” she shrugged, “you know how rumors are.”

“So, what’s *he* like?”

“That’s the blond one I mentioned. A real rascal.” A shadow passed over Katherine’s eye. She took a moment, just breathing, and Scar wondered if she was having to compose herself. “You’ll want to watch out for him. He’s easy enough to spot, though, given he’s got a wooden hand. Don’t let that fool you into thinking he’s not dangerous, though.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Scar said, a raw smile pulling at the corner of his lip. Half of why Scar was alive—permanently injured, sure, but *alive*—was because he never underestimated anyone. And he was very, *very* good at seeing what a man wanted him to miss.

Ten minutes later, with full descriptions of the men who made up the Red Hand gang in its entirety, Scar was back out in the glimmering sunshine, looking out at a town surviving by the skin of their teeth.

His heart ached for Del Sombra. Even so, he got back on Jumbles, and pointed his nose toward Lonesome Hill, the ‘sister’ city to La Belle.

He figured it was well past time to ask a man about a train.

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Lonesome Hill was nothing like La Belle. Where La Belle had been a town nearly broken by circumstance, Lonesome Hill, apropos to the name, seemed to thrive. Scar was pretty sure it was as big a town could get before they started calling it a city, and the cobbled roads and crush of people were a far cry from Del Sombra.

And there she was again, a specter at the back of his mind: his very own California Widow, begging him to come home. He felt his mouth twitch at the thought of his self-proclaimed bride, her shadows as her mourning veil, the wind through the canyons her mourning song.

As he let his mind wander, he wondered what Grian would say if Scar told him that he was already spoken for, and he’d need to win Scar’s beloved town over, too. Imagining Grian’s look of incredulity, the clear thought that Scar must have lost his mind on his endless journey, was nearly enough to lift Scar’s spirits.

Grian would never begrudge Scar a little madness.

Well, *probably*. Claiming to be married to a town might cross that line, even if Scar *had* joked about it in the past.

At the sound of footsteps in the hall, Scar let the idea fade away, the thought of introducing Grian to Del Sombra *properly* lingering at the back of his mind for a moment longer—his ‘wife’ and the man he loved, acquainted at last. He wanted to give Grian a tour of the town in a new light, wanted to show her off, not to someone who had one foot out of the door, but who was planning on *staying*. He wanted Grian to learn to love the sounds of crickets in the evening, the low song of the river as it passed behind Scar’s home in the early morning. He wanted to recontextualize Del Sombra for Grian, not as another pass-through, something to be forgotten, but somewhere to cherish, to treasure, to *stay*.

A gentleman with long, dark hair rounded the corner, and Scar forced thoughts of home away. The man was dressed smartly, but not ostentatiously. If Scar had passed him on the street, he didn’t think he would even really notice him, if not for the large scar that criss-crossed his face, a rival to Scar’s own. As he approached, and Scar stood, Scar noticed that he was tall, if a few inches shorter than Scar himself.

Despite the clear evidence of hardship on his face, much like Scar’s, the smile he gave when he saw Scar stand seemed to come to him easily.

Scar had heard rumors of what had happened, but as far as he knew, Mayor Hollows had never confirmed what happened one way or another. Did he duel his own brother? Did he get caught on the wrong side of a highwayman’s blade? Was the wound inflicted in an act of desperation—not an x, but a cross made by an overzealous priest during an exorcism? No one knew, and the pleasant smile on the Mayor’s face gave no indication one way or another.

“Good evening, Sheriff,” Mayor Hollows began, his tone apologetic, “I hate to have kept you waiting, but I was in a meeting,” the mayor moved as if to pull his fingers through his hair, but stopped, clearly remembering at the last possible moment that he had it tied back. He seemed frazzled, his mind half focused on the problem behind him.

“Oh no trouble, no trouble at all,” Scar said, with a cheer that he didn’t quite feel. This was an easy tone to fall back on, disarming, pleasant, and affable. “I just have a couple of questions about the attempted train robbery a few weeks back.”

Mayor Hollows’s face brightened at the mention of the foiled heist and Scar watched, rapt, as some of that nervous energy seemed to drain out of him.

“We tried convincing Tango to stick around, offered him a full pardon and everything, but turning on his buddies must have really spooked him,” Mayor Hollows shook his head, seeming genuinely distressed about it. “I can only hope that he finds a place to rest his head, and a trustworthy soul to watch his back.”

“It sounds like he’s right to be nervous,” Scar put in, “Bettermost was known for being tight-knit, I can only imagine what a betrayal like Tango’s must have meant, especially since rumor has it they’re shackled up with the Red Hands, now.”

It was a question without a question: Tango had left his compatriots in a train carriage. What happened next.

Mayor Hollows made that aborted hand motion again, but stopped, this time, to twist the ends of his hair around his fingertips.

“By the time we rode down the line to fetch them, they were gone. We sent out men in every direction, but...” he trailed off with a shrug.

“No sign of them,” Scar said, feeling the confirmation hit like a nail in his coffin. From what Tango had told him, in that roundabout, terrified story he’d spun, Scar could guess how he’d gotten away.

He and Nick didn’t talk often about Nick’s *other* little friends, the ones who had made worse Deals, the ones who hadn’t gotten away. Worse still, the ones had made themselves *useful* to Nick. However, Scar had a hazy, terror-tinged memory of the time he’d finally convinced Nick that he didn’t have a heart for Nick to steal, when Nick had threatened him with his bounty hunter. A man, as far as Nick would say, that it was impossible to run from, whose eyes could spot the threads of any Deal and follow them across the globe, whose horse could trample armies and freeze oceans under her hooves.

Scar had a sinking feeling that one of those ‘not-a-coincidences’ was creeping up on him.

Later, he sat on the floor of his rented room and pulled three cards from his deck. He could feel the magic in them shimmering under his fingers, bright and powerful, calling to him.

“Where was I?” he asked, murmuring it to the first card. It seemed to jump to his fingertips. He placed it facedown on the floor in front of his crossed legs. His leg started to twinge from the position he sat in, but he ignored it, for now. So long as he was quick about this, he could grab his bag and be on his way before the warning twinges turned into something harder to bear.

“Where do I want to be?” he asked the next card and placed it beside the first. He drummed his fingers on the deck, debating his last question. If he asked the wrong one, he knew he could skew the outcome of his reading. *Where should I be?* Would bring him a different answer than *where do I need to be?* And *who needs me most?* Would tell him something different than *who do I need to be with?* Tricky things, his cards, but he was good with the interpretations, better still at deciphering the magic that the cards held and knowing what their whispers were trying to tell him, and best yet at working around the loopholes his tired heart wanted to take advantage of.

Del Sombra was counting on him to catch these madmen before they found their way to Tango and burned down his precious town in their wake. He didn’t know if it would work, but he wasn’t about to risk it. He sighed, pulling the memory of Grian’s arms around him like a blanket. He basked in it for a moment before he let it fade away and focused on his task. Grian, the king of denying himself things, would be proud at his restraint.

“Where do I need to be?” he murmured to his deck, and the final card all but leapt into his hand.

He placed it at the end of the line of cards and moved back to the first one.

The hierophant, reversed, stared back up at him. The shape of the overlarge moon flooded the bottom of the card, and the feet of the figure in the tree pointed toward the inky shadows that made up the reversal’s black sky. *Where was I?* he’d asked, and the cards had told him true enough: La Belle.

Confirmation enough that his questions were the right ones.

He hadn’t needed to ask the second one, really. He knew where he wanted to be. He flipped the card over and smiled at the familiar sight of the open bag of coins spilling across the floor. Justice, the card he’d come to associate with Del Sombra. He wanted nothing more than to be home, kicking the dust of the day off his shoes and hoping that he could convince Grian to stay for dinner. He ran his thumb over the cigarette case in his vest pocket, the skin of his fingers already halfway to memorizing the embossed initials, gaudy and over-the-top and clearly a gift that Grian had held onto until passing it over to Scar, having pinched Scar’s own cigarettes, swapping Scar’s more sedate and boring cigarette case for his own.

Scar refused to read into the gesture until Jumbles’s nose was pointed toward home, but that didn’t stop the thoughts from floating to the surface: the idea that Grian wanted to have something of Scar’s while he was gone. Whether it was insurance that Scar would come back for the *case*, even if not for Grian, or that Grian’s case in his pocket was a token akin to a Lady’s Favor, Scar didn’t pretend to know. Knowing Grian, it was probably both.

Scar let the thoughts swirl away, so they wouldn’t interrupt the flow of his interpretation of the next card. He turned it over, pushing aside the wish that there was some way for it to *also* be Justice.

Temperance stared up at him, a wheel of ants, marching in a circle.

Patience, the card seemed to whisper to him. Scar felt his eye twitch. *Patience*.

It seemed that he would be staying right where he was, whether he liked it or not.

Chapter End Notes

Things are starting to ramp up a little! Hopefully this chapter was worth the wait <3
With any luck we won't have any other hiccups before next update.

Also big shout out if anyone can figure out why I named Scar's horse Jumbles! ;)

As always, a big thanks to my lovely artists: [Hybbart](#) and [Foxyola!](#)

You can also come find me on tumblr [here!](#)

See you Monday for chapter 6! (knocks on wood, crosses fingers, etc. etc.)

Stick and Stone

Chapter Summary

Tango is no stranger to being alone at this point in his existence, but as time goes on in Del Sombra, how will he deal with the sudden onslaught of feeling *lonely*?

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for the wonderful supportive comments on the last chapter <3 I'm feeling a lot better than I was (at last!!) and the good vibes y'all sent my way were a big contributor!

Gonna rush off and respond to the comments on the last two chapters now that I've got some brain cells kicking around up in the old noodle again.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It took Tango a minute, after heaving himself out of bed, to realize what was strange about the morning. He shuffled to the window, yawning, and tried to catch the first glitter of the dawn on the river. It was still grey outside, the sun still trying to clamber above the canyon on the other side of town, and it painted the brushland and farmhouses behind the town proper in dancing stretches of shade. If Tango squinted, he could see shapes moving in the dark, the first signs of the ranch-hands taking the animals out into the yard. The disgruntled mooing of the cattle was soft from here. Tango couldn't help but grin at the thought of how loud those animals must be up close.

He glanced over, to where he sometimes met Jimmy at this point, the pair of them leaning on their sills, watching the reflection of the sunrise in the sky and the river. Tango wasn't an early riser by rote, but *Jimmy* apparently was, and that first morning had sort of set the pace for the ones to follow. Tango would wake to the sounds of Jimmy moving about in his room, fight off a wave of fond exasperation when he realized how *damned dark* it still was out there, but would write sleep off with a sigh and haul himself out of bed and into the waking world at Jimmy's side.

Maybe it should have felt stranger than it did, ending up so close to the sheriff of the town, a man he'd nearly robbed, but Tango... honestly kept forgetting. He would forget who he was, or who Jimmy was, or what that *meant*, technically, simply because it was so easy to exist in Del Sombra... so easy to relish in the bubble of safety and let himself be *Tango*, or whoever Tango wanted to be. Being around Jimmy was even easier. It should have scared him, knowing that if Scar failed, being this close to Tango would put Jimmy directly on Etho and

Bdubs's hit lists. He knew that he should have distanced himself from the beginning, when he first felt his eyes linger on the man, or when he realized how simple falling into a pattern of friendship with him would be, but he hadn't. The guilt of it kept him up late, some nights, listening to the sound of Jimmy's breathing through the thin wooden wall, his ear pressed against it so snugly that he thought he might just hear it if Beef ended up with termites. Those nights, he would stay up until his eyes couldn't be propped open any longer. Those nights, he slept so soundly that he didn't dream, and so late that it sometimes took Jimmy knocking on the wall to wake him fully.

Those nights, it was nigh impossible to keep lying to himself.

Tango frowned at the window. He couldn't see the flicker of a lamp through it, and it finally hit him, what felt so different, today.

By now, he could usually hear Jimmy on the other side of the wall, shuffling around or humming to himself. He couldn't carry a tune in a bucket, but Tango had gone a little soft on the sound. Sometimes, even if Jimmy didn't get it in mind to open the window, if Tango stuck his whole head and shoulders through it, and really begged for a crick in his neck, he'd usually hear Jimmy at the washbasin, shaving in the little mirror the bunkhouse provided them.

Today there was no humming, no muffled swearing as Jimmy accidentally bumped into the bed or the wardrobe, nor even the sound of the window creaking open for a breeze.

There was only silence.

Tango'd been here a fair few days now—just past a month, he realized with a shock. It had been so *easy* to fall into a life here. It warmed him a little, to think of how readily accepting everyone had been, once he'd started helping out around the town.

The warmth was immediately followed by a curl of guilt, smoky and cloying at the base of his gut. He'd fallen into a pattern of normalcy that he didn't deserve but was clinging to with both hands—and he'd come to abide by a certain routine.

He relished it. Even the idea of a *routine* was something so alien that Tango found that he itched at the interruption of it. He wanted these slow mornings to repeat forever.

He knocked on the wall, mimicking the pattern that Jimmy had introduced, that first night. The knock that had all but become a conversation starter: *I'm up, are you?*

No answer.

He dressed in a hurry, the smoky guilt-haze mixing with his constant, low-grade fear to create a choking, all-encompassing panic.

He hesitated at his door, sure beyond comprehension for a moment, that he'd walk down the stairs to find everyone dead, right before Etho pointed his cursed Peacemaker between Tango's eyes.

He was surer still that he'd dreamed all of this, that he was in the last throes of a death-dream, and he'd have to contend with whatever came next. Maybe he'd never left Hell at all. Maybe he'd never set foot in the frosts of Michigan, and instead had slid down the rocky stairs back to whence he'd come, and this was his punishment: finding a place that he could live, could find a sense of *home*, even, only to be told it was never real to begin with.

Could he put that past the Devil? Certainly not, but now that the thought was there, it pulled at him, despair dragged at his feet as he tried to reach the door. His hand, when he lifted it, felt like he was wearing manacles, not of iron, but of lead.

Would he ever see Jimmy again?

The thought crashed into him, knocking him out of his reverie and off-balance in a way he hadn't expected. He leaned heavily against the doorframe, head spinning with the whiplash of certainty, suddenly, that this wasn't a dream or a trap.

Hell couldn't have come up with Jimmy.

The Devil could never have dreamed up his smile, or the way his voice sounded when he laughed.

Tango leaned his head against the door and waited for the room to stop dancing a reel around him.

Sure, he reasoned, maybe they were both trapped down there, maybe this was a strange trap of the Devil's design: put two poor souls together and then—

Then *what*?

Tango banged his forehead on the door.

"He doesn't feel that way about you, you jerkwater hick," Tango said aloud. He hadn't lived in a nothing town in more than thirty years. Hell, the place he'd been born in probably didn't *exist* anymore, but Tango knew where he'd come from. Part of him knew it was why he was so taken with Del Sombra. A little, middle-of-nowhere—*jerkwater*—mining town, filled with the sorts of people who made these lives *work*. And from all reports, Scar was putting Del Sombra on the map. She'd never be as big as Chicago or New York, but she'd be *respectable*. She'd be *theirs*.

Not Tango's, though.

As he blinked the sting from his eyes, he tried to settle himself back down. It was stupid of him to get this close, not just to the town as a whole, but to *Jimmy*. He'd had his little taste of normal, his little taste of *happiness*. It was best to pack up and move on out before he got them all caught in the crossfire. He could drop off the sprinkler with False, maybe ask her to finish it for him, so he wouldn't be leaving Grian and Pearl (and Jimmy) high and dry.

Sure, Scar would be disappointed in Tango for not trusting him, but in hindsight, what could one man *do* against Etho? Especially if Etho got it in his head to use one of Scar's Deals to

bring Scar down?

Etho would track him down eventually, and there would be hell to pay for Del Sombra if Tango were still here when he came. He'd known that from the jump, but he'd ignored it. Now, with the earth-shaking understanding of what he might feel if he were the last man standing in Del Sombra, if he had to watch *Jimmy* go down, Tango understood.

He took the stairs the way he would have walked to the gallows, if they'd caught him in his last life. As he rounded the hallway he saw Beef, yawning gently behind his hand. The fear turned blue and faded around the edges. He was going to miss Beef. He was going to miss *everyone*.

Beef waved to Tango. Tango waved back. Any other morning he'd have stopped to say hello. Any other morning, he wouldn't be struggling to breathe around the burning remnants of fear and despair lodged in his throat. He pointed out the door, what he hoped was an apologetic look on his face and broke away before Beef could so much as say "good morning." He'd hate himself later for not saying goodbye.

The world rang in his ears, the sound of his lonely boots too loud on the packed earth beneath them as he sped to Sausage's saloon. He should leave on an empty stomach, but part of him, *all* of him wanted one last look at Jimmy before he left. It was a real yack thing to do, he knew it, but he couldn't help himself.

He *also* couldn't help but be disappointed when the only person to be seen in the saloon was Sausage himself.

"Oh hello!" Sausage greeted Tango when he poked his head in. It was still early enough for the place to be empty, but Tango scanned the shadows for Jimmy a second time all the same. He was nowhere to be seen. "Come in, come in," Sausage urged, before Tango could follow the lead he'd set with Beef and leave without a word.

Hesitantly, Tango went inside. He realized, abruptly, that he'd never been in here *alone*. Not just alone with Sausage, but by himself proper. He'd always come in with Jimmy, or the once with Scar, and it felt strange, not having someone to his left. He could feel the space Jimmy was meant to occupy echoing around him.

Was it going to be like this forever, he wondered? Was he going to miss Jimmy every day for the rest of his life? He supposed it would be the same as it was with Impulse, Zedaph, and Skizz... all the people who'd left their mark on him, but couldn't be there with him now.

Would it be better or worse, knowing Jimmy was alive and well in Del Sombra, as Tango pushed on, running until he couldn't take it anymore?

The thought left him feeling sick.

"Jimmy told me you'd be along, but I didn't expect you so soon!" Tango felt his attention, which had been directed elsewhere, shoot to Sausage. He was almost glad that Sausage didn't give him a chance to respond, he wasn't sure what he would have said if he did. "I'll have

something over to you as quick as I can! If you'd come down a few minutes from now you'd have had something waiting for you, but I can't predict everything."

"Um..." Tango began, unsure of how he should proceed. Sausage had already called Jimmy by name, but was he supposed to follow suit? He realized, suddenly, how informal he'd been with the *sheriff* of the town he was in.

It had all just felt so simple, with Jimmy. He didn't have to watch his back or fight the urge to be armed constantly. Hell, Jimmy had long since proven that he had *Tango's* back. Maybe not in a fight, but in smaller ways. He'd woken Tango from his memories-turned-nightmares, he'd stuck around with Tango and listened to him babble ceaselessly about things that he'd admitted that he didn't understand. Even now, he was subtly looking out for Tango, making sure he ate, even if he didn't realize that was what he was doing.

Something Tango refused to name rose in his chest. If he named it, it would hurt more. He realized that Sausage had stopped moving around, and was waiting for Tango to finish his sentence, one eyebrow raised. Tango waved his hand, trying to catch the sentence in midair.

"Where is Jim—the sheriff?" he asked at last, falling back on formality at the last second.

Sausage stared at him a moment longer, that grin still fixed upon his face, and then he was off again.

"Oh, he's around here somewhere," Sausage said, bustling again. His voice muffled a little as he walked through a small door and into what Tango presumed was a kitchen. "Very busy man, our sheriff. Busy even before he became sheriff! Or deputy!"

Tango hesitated. He really should leave, should point his feet towards the tracks and not stop until he *got* stopped, or his feet fell out from under him.

There couldn't be much harm in a meal, though, right? Not when Jimmy had specifically wanted to make sure he ate? And having something in his belly on the road would make double sure that he could walk as far as possible before he had to stop. It was the right call.

Talking to Sausage was just a bonus.

Tango slid into the barstool closest to the half-open door. The world seemed a little quieter, now that he knew Jimmy was safe, now that he knew he was 'somewhere.' He was curious about what had gotten the erstwhile sheriff up so early, but then again, he was curious about a lot of things.

Things he'd probably never get an answer to, now that he'd made up his mind.

"What's he like?" he asked, aware that it wasn't the question he *wanted* to ask.

"Who, Jimmy? You've met him, silly, I'm sure you know him better than I do, at this point!"

"I—" Tango cut himself off. He what? He didn't believe that? Or he wanted to know Jimmy *better*? Neither one was something that he thought he could say to Sausage, barman and friend of Jimmy's or no. "I'm curious how other people see him."

Sausage was quiet for a minute, and the scent of food began to fill the air.

Tango didn't bear to speak. He wanted to hear everything about Jimmy. Jimmy the sheriff, Jimmy the deputy, Jimmy the man.

Tango wasn't about to pretend that the latter wasn't what interested him the most.

Sausage pushed a rag around on the bartop, his eyes a hundred miles away as he began to speak.

"The Ratcliffe's came to us, oh, about a year ago now," he began, "The sheriff had finally gotten a station built up on the railroad—I say *finally*, but looking back on it he did that faster than I'd ever seen a man move. I don't think the rail company hardly had time to negotiate with him. It was like they set foot on Del Sombra's soil and *bang!*" Sausage snapped his fingers, "they had to do it."

Tango felt his eye twitch. He filed that away for later.

"So, people started rolling in, getting off trains for a bite here at Sanctuary, staying overnight so they could make a different train the next day, that sort of thing. Most people headed further west, but some folks stopped. That's how we got Miss Alice and her girls, and Cleo, and Scott."

"I didn't know they weren't local," Tango admitted, though, in hindsight, he should have. Their accents were dead giveaways, same as Jimmy's. But just like he had with Jimmy, Tango had gotten used to them.

"Very few of us are local," Sausage said, simply, "Technically, *I'm* not even local. I've lived here most of my life, sure, but my family moved here when I was young, back when Del Sombra was booming the *first* time. Let's see... Chef has been here my whole life. Beef has been here ages, too. Keralis and Mumbo moved here with the railroad, too, now that I think on it. It's a bit strange, actually, I don't remember Mumbo showing up, but he must have. He might have come right before Hermès and I caught the pox."

"You... *both* got it? And you both survived?" Tango felt a shock run through him. He'd never seen a smallpox survivor look so *unscathed* as Sausage or Hermès. Looking at him now, Tango realized that the scar on Sausage's face was probably *not* from fighting off cattle rustlers, as he tended to tell patrons. Smallpox scarring was distinctive, true, but if a man says loud enough and often enough that he got a scar a certain way, that's going to be the story that gets repeated.

Tango couldn't help but be surprised about little Hermès, though. Of those least likely to survive, children had it the worst. His heart ached a bit for what the boy had gone through, for what *Sausage* had had to go through, not just once, but twice.

Sausage seemed to catch Tango's train of thought and smiled sadly.

"If it weren't for the sheriff," Sausage said, for once without a trace of a smile in his voice, "I don't know if a single person in town would have survived."

Something about the way that Sausage said that shook Tango, “It’s—” he began, “I mean, it’s *deadly*, yeah, but people... people survive?” he said, his voice turning it into a question at the end. Sausage shook his head.

“That’s not what I mean. Some folk didn’t get it at all. They would have been fine, but no one comes to a place like this, once it’s been hit the way it was. The town would have died, and those of us who couldn’t move away would have died with it, eventually. And the sheriff... you should have seen it. He walked in and the town collapsed around him, Tango. He showed up to sell us a cure that doesn’t exist, and in the course of a few weeks, he *made* it exist.” Sausage shook his head, his eyes a hundred miles away, “Now, do I think he could ever replicate it? No. No, I don’t.” Sausage looked at Tango, pointedly.

Tango got the creeping feeling that Sausage knew more about Scar’s situation than he let on. After a moment, Tango nodded, and Sausage continued, seemingly satisfied.

“But he saved a lot of us. He saved more of us than he rightly should have. I was on Death’s door, Hermès, bless him, probably would have died, too. I don’t know that even if he survived the pox, anyone would have been able to look after him. Some of the other families in town, too...” Sausage shook his head. “We lost a lot of people, but Scar saved more.”

“And that’s why no one wanted to see him leave?” Tango guessed.

“Some of it,” Sausage hedged, “some of it. But we were talking about Jimmy. Now, once the sheriff got the railroad up and running, and he and Chef got the mine reopened, the town was doing good. Great, fantastic, even! And up rolled the train one afternoon, and the sheriff went to meet it. Now, some of us had a bet on, thinking it must be his wife, or he’d gotten someone fancy to come invest, but no. Off step these three nobodies. None of them say a word of where they’d come from or where they were going. Grian wouldn’t even tell us his *name* for the first few weeks he was here. Naturally, this got everyone curious. Grian wouldn’t talk to anyone but Scar, and *barely*, so we all figure we’d try our hand at the others. Well, turns out Pearl and Jimmy are both natural chatters. They’ll chat, chat, chat all day long, but when you go home and settle in for the night, you realize that you know *nothing* new.” Sausage chuckled at the memory. “Funny, isn’t it? They both seem so open, now, but we still know nothing about where they came from. I think the person who knows most about them is Hermès, because he got both Pearla and Jimmy to talk about their time at sea.”

“Funny,” Tango said, feeling a bit weak.

He hadn’t *asked* about Jimmy’s past. He knew there was something there, knew it wasn’t *good*, and he knew that Pearl had been through something... awful. His head throbbed just thinking about what he’d seen when Jimmy had passed him back his sickles, and he’d made the fool mistake of checking them over there in the same room as the Ratcliffes.

That wasn’t the sort of thing that happened without a *reason*.

It turned out, though, that asking would have gotten him bunk.

“So,” Sausage said, leveling Tango with that same look he’d given him earlier, “If you’re hoping to get out of me something you can’t get out of Jimmy—”

Tango felt his eyes go wide.

“Wh—no! No, not at all, definitely *no*,” Tango said, the words rushing from his lips faster than the river out back.

“Good,” Sausage said, and the air in the saloon seemed to lighten, both in weight and in brightness. Sausage ducked behind the door to the kitchen and swore colorfully. The strange attitude seemingly dispersed in its entirety. Tango hadn’t realized, until that moment, exactly how threatening Sausage could *be*. Another moment passed, and Sausage emerged with a grin, a plate held aloft. Tango blinked at him, his mind still reeling, as the man cheerfully put Tango’s breakfast on the counter between them.

“As for how he is *now*,” Sausage added, folding and unfolding the rag in his hands, “he’s a good man, Tango. Better than Del Sombra deserves, probably. But he became deputy when Scar asked, and sheriff the day *after*, and I think it’s been good for him.”

It took Tango a minute to realize that Sausage was talking about Jimmy again.

Sausage caught Tango’s eyes, despite Tango’s attempt to avoid such a thing, “I think having you around has been good for him, too.”

Tango opened his mouth to answer but couldn’t seem to find one. He closed it again, feeling the weight of Sausage’s words hit him, a sharp reminder that Tango had decided, just a few minutes before walking through these doors, to leave Del Sombra. To leave *Jimmy*.

He tucked in, and Sausage let him be. His humming was a stark contrast to Jimmy’s made-up tunes, but it was familiar enough to sting.

Tango ate quietly, turning the information he’d gained over in his head. He couldn’t bear to look at all of the things he’d learned about Jimmy, even though he’d asked about them.

He shoved everything about Jimmy to the back of his mind, and felt his mind catch on what he’d learned about *Scar*, instead.

Scar had gotten Old Scratch to build him a railroad. He’d even managed to get a *cure for smallpox* out of the guy. That was...

There were levels to that that terrified Tango, to his core. The thought of so much as seeing the Devil again was enough to strike dread into Tango’s heart. Making a deal? *Bargaining*, even? It was unthinkable.

Tango hadn’t thought to ask around about Scar’s Deal before now, but here he was, with another piece of what he was certain belonged to that puzzle. He didn’t think he wanted the rest of it. He didn’t know if he wanted to see the picture it made.

Thinking about it like that, Deals and puzzles, reminded Tango harshly, suddenly, of Skizz. Back before they’d found Etho and Bdubs, when it was still just the two of them high on the hog, they’d stolen a genuine Spilsbury. Tango could still remember watching his friend’s face

as he'd painstakingly slotted the countries together, his tongue sticking out between his teeth, to prove all the pieces were there before they found a buyer for it.

Tango propped his forehead against his fist, trying to push the memories back where they belonged. One thought floated, traitorously, to the surface:

Skizz would have loved it here.

~

"So, what's your name, stranger?" asked the man whose pants Tango was wearing.

They were holed up in a campsite off the road, half-hidden behind a copse of trees. Tango could *almost* feel pine needles and tiny stones digging into the soles of his feet, and the smell of brimstone was finally, *finally*, being replaced by the overwhelming scent of horse.

He buried his nose in the blanket wrapped around his shoulders and inhaled, trying to breathe in as much of that smell as he could before he had to give the blanket back to the horse.

When he felt like he could speak without screaming, he drew the rest of his face back out of the cocoon of warmth the blanket provided.

"Tango," he said. The stranger grinned at him; his piercing blue eyes were unsettling in the light of the flames. The chill of fear and winter was slowly melting off Tango's bones, leaving a familiar exhaustion in its wake. He wiggled his toes a bit, digging them into the loam at his feet, seeking any sort of warmth.

He ignored the knowledge that, if he were to look down the soles of his feet would be blackened as if by frostbite. He shuddered, remembering the way that his feet had hit the top step of some horrendous staircase, remembering the way that he had burned with cold. A great howling wind had threatened to shove him down the stairs. The sickle at his back, drawn from the belt at the Devil's waist had been a silent, ever-present threat.

Even now, he wasn't sure if it had been stupidity or bravery that had gotten him out. A fistful of sand and a surge of strength had given him a moment, the barest instant, where he could grip at the sickle and wrest it free of his captor's hand. He'd sliced through the belt at the Devil's waist, and ran back the way that they'd come.

He pointedly ignored the belt where it lay next to him. Adrenaline still pumped through him, telling him to keep moving, keep running, he'd need to be quicker and cleverer than he'd ever been if he wanted to *stay* escaped, but...

He was so tired.

"Tango," the stranger repeated, sounding out the name. The sound of his voice startled Tango, jolting him out of his memory and back into the present. The man across the fire elongated the vowels in his name, casting his eyes up toward the darkening sky. "Tango, Tango, *Tangoooo*. Where have I heard that before?"

“It’s a dance, for one.” Tango said, the ghost of a smile threading across his face, despite everything about the situation.

“Nah, that’s not it,” the man shrugged, “it’ll come to me eventually. These things always do!”

“Sure,” Tango agreed, yawning. The adrenaline was fading fast, now, leaving more cold to leech into his fingers. He still couldn’t feel his toes. “And you are?”

“The one and only Skizz McMann, at your service!” Skizz said, bending double into a half-bow from where he sat. That grin was infectious. In another life, Tango thought that he and Impulse would have gotten on like a house on fire.

“Skizz, huh? Can’t say I’ve heard that one before.”

“Well, I’d hope not! I came up with it myself!”

The thread of a smile settled into place on Tango’s cheeks. “So did I,” he said, wearily.

“Tango, I mean. Not Skizz, obviously. Though, I’ll be straight with you, odds are not in my favor on this being all in my head.”

Skizz’s eyebrows reached for the sky. He seemed to take in the sight of Tango again, clad in his spare Levi’s and the saddle blanket off his horse, and Tango realized, a beat too late, that maybe he shouldn’t have said that.

“Alright,” Skizz said, after a second, “*something’s* clearly got you spooked. Answer me this, how’s a guy end up in nothing but his birthday suit in the middle of a Michigan winter?”

Tango swallowed sharply. There was dirt under his fingernails. The belt at his side seemed to eye him.

“Bad luck,” Tango said, “really, *really* bad luck.”

Skizz looked at him, those too-blue eyes unflinching, and Tango looked back, wondering idly if he had enough energy to run, now that the panic was dying down. If Skizz came at him, that could easily be it: he’d be right back where he started, only ten times worse off.

Then, miracle of miracles, Skizz shrugged, and set about putting together a little campfire pot.

“You could say that again,” he said, the cheer back in his voice. “On the bright side, looks like your luck just turned around, partner!”

Disbelief hung around Tango like another blanket, muffling Skizz’s words as he started to chatter away.

“I’m no man to judge, see,” he was saying, though Tango barely heard, “even if a man has gone stark raving and decided to go skinny dipping in January.”

“Hey, wh—” Tango protested, the absurdity of the statement breaking him out of the haze that had started to claw at him. “I didn’t go *skinny dipping*, I was running for my life!”

“Mmhm, mmhm, like a bat out of hell,” Skizz agreed. If he noticed the way that Tango froze at the words, he didn’t show it. “Still, I think this could be the sign of someone out there looking out for us. I need an extra pair of hands for a job I’m doing, and *you* need shoes.”

Tango’s feet were beginning to tingle painfully. The dull pressure of the rocks and needles against his skin were coalescing into actual prickles of pain. He never thought he’d be so glad to feel it.

“What’s the job?” Tango asked, because if he *was* going to start getting feeling back in his feet, shoes were an unfortunate necessity. And, if nothing else, he owed Skizz one.

“Oh nothing bad, nothing bad at all.” Skizz grinned, “We’re just going to rob Hell blind.”

~

Tango emerged back out into the now-bright morning and grimaced, holding his hand over his eyes to let them adjust. He tried to shake the cobwebs from his ears, hoping to dislodge the memories of the little bank down in Hell, Michigan, the one that had put him and Skizz on Bdubs’s radar. He wished, not for the first time, that they’d missed their window.

When he blinked the spots out of his eyes and was pretty sure he wasn’t about to blind himself, he lifted his hand away again. He swore, stumbling backwards.

“Hi Tango!” Gem crowed, her voice gleeful from where she’d snuck up next to him. “Where’s your shadow?”

“Stuck to my feet,” Tango said, doing his best to keep his voice level and pretend that he hadn’t been scared out of his wits by this slip of a girl. A pang shot through him at the sight of the smile on her face. Abruptly, absurdly, Tango didn’t *want* this to be his last day in Del Sombra. He wanted to pick Sausage’s brain about the goings-on of the town, wanted Gem to grin at him like this, like he was in on the joke she was telling. He tried to force the feeling back as Gem waved his protests off.

“Oh, you know who I meant,” she admonished, playfully, “but if you’re not following Jimmy around this morning, would you be able to help me out for a minute?”

“I don’t follow him around!” Tango protested “And shadows don’t go ahead of their people.”

“They do if you’re facing the right direction. Now, are you helping or are you busy?”

Gem set on him a look that said that she knew he wasn’t, and she would have called him a liar if he’d tried to pretend otherwise.

“Looks like I’m helping,” he said reluctantly. “Though, I really ought to go find the sheriff.”

That was a lie. He’d decided while listening to Sausage that he wouldn’t be strong enough to see Jimmy again and *then* leave. He could barely stand the thought of leaving as it was, how was he supposed to do it properly if he caught Jimmy’s eye again? If Jimmy smiled at him?

If Tango hadn't gotten ambushed by the cheerful schoolmistress, he'd be halfway to the train station by now.

"Excellent!" Gem said, ignoring Tango's comment about Jimmy. She grabbed him by the arm and pulled him away, toward where Tango knew the schoolhouse was, from Jimmy giving him a bashful tour on his third day in town, when Tango had admitted to not knowing where anything was.

Quickly, she conscripted him into helping her tidy up before the children arrived, and Tango found himself wiping down slates and putting away the various accoutrement that seemed to follow kids around. It was odd, doing something so mundane. He'd gotten to know Gem a bit over the time he'd been in town, same as anyone, and she was always friendly, always open. He liked her well enough, but he couldn't shake the stone of guilt that settled in his gut whenever he was around any of them for too long. That was fine, though. He was fixing it.

He could still fix it.

The slate creaked in his grip, and the chalk inscription in childish handwriting blotted and smeared as a few tears dripped off of Tango's nose.

Tango swiped at his eyes and erased what remained of the little message one of the children had left, '*Miss Gem is great!*' hurriedly trying to cover up the evidence that he'd lost his composure.

Gem's hand on his arm told him that he hadn't succeeded in time. He passed her the slate, and she took it without a word, though he could see in his periphery the way her mouth pinched against an onslaught of them.

"I should go," he said, stepping away from her attempt at comfort. Part of him wanted to pretend he didn't mean it as *I should leave town* instead of, *I should go find Jimmy*, but the fact that more of him wanted to find Jimmy and keep pretending he was an ordinary man meant that he *needed* to leave town. Before the dream got too seductive. Before the thought of being away from Jimmy unsettled him even more than it already had this morning. Before he thought it might be worth it to stay, even if it meant he only got a little while with these people.

These *great* people, who deserved more than what was coming for Tango.

He'd made up his mind, he reminded himself. He'd be gone before lunch.

Gem stepped in front of the door, blocking his exit. He'd either have to move her or hear her out. He didn't like either option.

"You really shouldn't," she said, her voice soft. It was her 'talking to upset students' voice, he could tell. Neither one of them were pretending, it seemed. "You're safe here."

"I'm a *criminal*, Gem. In case you'd forgotten," he snapped. She rolled her eyes at him.

“Everyone who lands here is or was *something*, Tango. This isn’t the sort of town that keeps ordinary people. You’re safer here than you would be anywhere else.”

Tango shook his head and moved to shove past Gem, though he was careful not to shove *too* hard.

“Jimmy sure wants you to stick around,” she said as he passed, as if that weren’t a low blow. Her voice was barely loud enough for him to hear, but the words still stopped him in his tracks.

Tango chose his words carefully, and his tone of voice even more delicately. “I don’t see why that should concern me.”

He did, though. And he could see in Gem’s disapproving frown that she saw that he knew it too.

“You’re not the only one running from something,” she continued, as if he hadn’t spoken. “And yet the three of them are all still here. Safe as houses.”

Tango didn’t point out that houses could only be *so* safe.

He knew he should turn away again, walk into that brilliant day and keep walking. He wanted to follow the railroad tracks until his feet stopped working and he needed to stop. He wanted to go find Jimmy and find out why he’d been up so early this morning. He wanted to see the quietly delighted expression he wore every morning when Tango opened his door to him, as if he was surprised that Tango was still there. He wanted to go find Jimmy, and that was exactly why he needed to walk out this door and find the next town, or the one after that. Steal a horse and keep going until he hit the border. His Spanish was terrible, but he could learn more.

Still, his brain was caught on the words *Jimmy wants you to stick around*.

His jaw worked around a dozen sentences, dismissals, pleas, words of warning. He leaned his forehead against the doorjamb, as he tried to get the whirlwind to stop.

In the end, he settled on,

“You seen our sheriff this morning?”

Gem smiled.

Jimmy, as it turned out, had gone to Scar’s house, under the very obvious pretense of cleaning the place up. Tango leaned on the porch railing, looking in at him.

He was sweeping, supposedly, his vest gone, shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows. Tango saw neither hide nor hair of the hat or the guns, but he figured they were somewhere out of sight. He couldn’t see his sheriff’s face, not with the intensity of focus that Jimmy had on his task, but he could see the stiff line of his shoulders.

Now that just wouldn't do.

At the sound of the door, Jimmy's head shot up from where he'd been sweeping the same spot for the five minutes Tango had watched through the window. The whole weight of his body seemed to be resting on the broom.

"Tango!" he said, his eyes wide. Something nebulous and fragile passed across his face. "You're—you're here!"

You're still here, Jimmy had nearly said, he was sure of it.

Tango didn't know what face *he* was making, but he was sure it was dangerous for him, if not for Jimmy.

The fact that he was *here* was dangerous for him, and for Jimmy, and for Del Sombra, and he shouldn't have done it. It shouldn't have taken five little words to convince him, but he'd wanted so badly to be convinced.

He let that all slip away. He buried the guilt as far down as it would go and took a minute to just *look* at Jimmy. It seemed alright though, seeing as Jimmy spent the whole time just looking at him right back.

He took in a shaking breath, breathing in all of the joy and the normalcy and the *hope* that being near Jimmy seemed to bring him. He let it out, expelling all of the fear and self-loathing and the guilt that had built up over the course of the morning.

He'd made his decision. He wouldn't have the strength in him to try it again. And maybe Jimmy would hate him for it, and maybe Tango would die of it, but he'd have all the little moments in between to make it worth his while.

"You rascal," he said, his voice choked up, and too fond for his own good, "you're a terrible sheriff."

Jimmy made an indignant noise and puffed up, standing straight at last.

"I am a *fine* sheriff, thank you!"

"Green as the grass in the hills, to boot. Why didn't you say you'd bagged me on your *first day* as deputy?" Tango teased, dancing around what he really ought to have said.

"I—that—don't you, I mean, that would have undermined my authority as the deputy! And then as the sheriff! I didn't know what sort of person you were; you might have taken advantage of that!"

"Oh, I *definitely* would have." Tango admitted. And then because he couldn't stop himself, "You gave me the whole morning to skedaddle."

Jimmy swallowed, hard. Tango didn't stare. And he *definitely* didn't kiss him.

Hells bells, he wanted to, though.

Tango made his way into Scar's house, pretending to look around to give them both a moment. Okay, fine, to give *himself* a moment to breathe and let the dangerous urge pass. He'd already done one foolish thing for the day, and it was a big'un. Big enough to be his bad idea for the next several days. The next *month*, even.

"So, what's all this, then?" he asked, so Jimmy didn't have to answer. "You won't sleep in the man's house, but it's fine to invade it by day?"

Jimmy brandished the broom at him. His cheeks were dusted pink with embarrassment. Tango wished it weren't so endearing. If it hadn't been, Del Sombra might yet be safe from the likes of him.

"I gotta sweep, Tango! If I don't *sweep*, the man's gonna be six inches deep in dust by the time he gets back."

"Uh huh," Tango said, and if he let his eyes linger on Jimmy for a moment as he walked closer, not minding the dust he tracked in, because Jimmy hadn't *actually* cleared that much away, and with the way Jimmy's eyes were tracking him, he was sure Jimmy wouldn't notice. "So, why's it that I smell gunsmoke?"

"Oh," Jimmy said, seeming almost relieved at the question, "Scar's got his own range. I come out here to practice my aim."

Tango brightened. He spotted the gun belt on the table, the two half-familiar six-shooters beside it. He wasn't used to seeing them outside of their holsters.

"You finally going to show me how you shoot?" Tango asked and hoped that it didn't sound to Jimmy the way it sounded to *Tango*.

"I will if you do," Jimmy retorted, and to Tango's ears it sounded like half an answer to Tango's own unspoken query, and half a challenge.

Tango couldn't justify taking the risk, so he took the challenge, instead.

He followed Jimmy out into the burgeoning day and let the finality of *decision* settle on his shoulders, feeling for all the world like a borrowed saddle-blanket in the middle of winter.

Chapter End Notes

I will say, of all the chapters in this story, this one and chapter ten were the ones that fought me the most! We get a good old-fashioned Tango brand Spiral in this chapter and while I felt it was really important, it was also super hard to write!! Very fun though, I really enjoy the result, and hope you did too!

Thank you, as always, to the mods of the event, and to my artists [Hybbart](#) and [Foxyola](#)! We're officially past the halfway mark on this fic, and that means we're over halfway to

the wonderful pieces they have created! I'm so excited to share those with you all, they did such a fantastic job!

You can always come say hi on my [tumblr!](#)

Thank you all for reading, and I'll see you next week!

Stick and Stone (>.>)

Chapter Summary

Tango is no stranger to being alone at this point in his existence, but as time goes on in Del Sombra, how will he deal with the sudden onslaught of feeling lonely?

Chapter Notes

HAPPY DOUBLE UPDATE DAY OTL

Astute readers will notice that that is the same chapter title/summary as last chapter. I realized as I was doing my read-through at the Urgent Care that in my post-Covid haze I just forgot to post half of chapter 6. So, have about 4k more words!

I'll be back in a minute with chapter 7 (the real chapter 7).

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Later, he thought to himself that he *almost* wished that Jimmy were shit at shooting, because then he wouldn't still be seeing the flash of silver in the sun, or the way Jimmy's long fingers curled around the handle of the gun. He wished Jimmy hadn't been so delighted with Tango's *own* performance on the range, because the sight of him, delighted and impressed, had done things to Tango's heart that he couldn't really ignore.

Their diversion had come to a close when Jimmy had heard the whistle of the train coming into the station. He'd taken Scar's words to heart, and had made sure that he was on his guard whenever the train rolled in.

Tango shoved his hands as deep in his pockets as they could go, keeping them from moving without his express say-so as they meandered back into town.

Tango couldn't help the way his eyes seemed to gravitate back to Jimmy as they walked. He wanted to see Jimmy beam at him again.

Boons, but he wished Impulse and Zedaph and Skizz were still around. Any one of them would have mocked him relentlessly for going soft on a *sheriff*, green or no, but it would have been borne of love. He would have gotten to hear what they thought of Jimmy.

He thought that they would've liked Jimmy. That was the most terrifying part. Even Skizz, who'd never had real designs on being anything other than an outlaw, from the moment he dropped a pair of trousers in Tango's lap and asked if he'd never heard of frostbite, would have found Jimmy endearing. They would have reminded Tango, though, that something

would have to give, either Jimmy would have to give up the law, or he'd have to give up *Tango*, in the end, and that was if Jimmy ever even wanted him to begin with.

His thoughts spiraled further down and had landed him into a downright gray mood by the time the noise from the saloon reached their ears.

The place wasn't packed to the ears, but it *was* full. Sausage had apparently conscripted Gem to help, after she'd walked Hèrmes home. Tango could see the lantern light setting her hair aflame as she bustled around with a smile that he knew in his bones was genuine.

Jimmy's fingers on his elbow led him to a table at the back of the room, next to the cellar door. It was cooler over here, and Tango let the dimmer light and cooler temperature wash over him. It was still loud as anything, but he could feel a bit of his mood lifting, a bit of the pressure on his temples fading.

When he glanced over at Jimmy again, as he'd known he eventually would, Jimmy was looking at him right back. His brown eyes were soft and warm in the little lamplight that reached them, and he was leaning toward Tango, blocking the rest of the world from his view.

He noticed, Tango realized with a shock.

Jimmy had noticed that Tango needed space, that he did better in the darker, cooler areas. *Tango* hadn't even put that together for months after he'd climbed back up out of hell, covered in soot, clutching the belt he'd stolen, and naked as the day he was born in the horrid Michigan winter. But Jimmy had.

Tango's breath hitched in his throat, and he felt warmth pool in his chest, dangerous and beautiful. It should have been a warning, but Tango had already made the terrible, no good, horrible decision to stay. To stay and want what he couldn't have.

He licked his lips and fancied for a moment that the sheriff had followed the motion.

"Thank you," he croaked, unable to make his voice louder than what it insisted on being. Jimmy patted one of his clenched fists and stood again. He unhooked his gun belt, and Tango thought he did an admirable job of not paying any attention to that (okay, that was a damned lie, he had the motion of Jimmy's hands on the leather *memorized* by now) and hung it over the back of his chair.

"Back in two shakes," he said, and Tango, stretched thin as he was, could only nod his assent.

He propped his chin on his hand and watched Jimmy make his way through the saloon. He watched as Sausage said something and Jimmy's ears went red enough that Tango could see the change in color from here. Sausage disappeared back into the kitchen, and Jimmy turned, scanning the room. His eyes landed on Tango again, who realized, abruptly, that he hadn't stopped staring. Jimmy waved, a goofy little grin on his face, and Tango waved back.

A shout from the front of the saloon drew Jimmy's eye away from Tango, and Tango saw in real time as Jimmy-the-man vanished, and the sheriff took his place. Jimmy was moving before Tango even thought to look for what the problem might be.

Gem was pulling herself back up off the floor, and Tango's blood went cold. Not at the idea that someone had hit Gem, not at the realization that Jimmy was about to intervene, but at the look in Gem's eye. Anyone else might have seen her and thought she was mad enough to spit, but Tango knew that face.

It was that look that got Tango moving.

He got to Gem before Gem got to the knife on the table beside her. That was the first miracle of the day.

The second was that she let him pull her away while Jimmy talked, loud and ludicrous, over the men.

"Don't," he whispered, not entirely sure if Gem could hear him. "They're not worth it."

He kept moving until the two of them were behind the bar, and shoved them both through the door to the kitchen, into the small space with a surprised Sausage.

"*Qué estás—*" Sausage began, before he seemed to take in Gem's posture, and the way that Tango was blocking the door.

Gem raised shaking hands to her face and covered her mouth. Sausage glanced between them, clearly unsure what had happened, or what was *going* to happen, but Tango kept his eyes firmly on Gem.

"Couple'a—" Gem started, after a moment. Her words blurred together and she stopped again.

He watched Gem deliberately, very deliberately, take a breath. When she opened her eyes again, Tango relaxed. She had control over herself again, that much was plain.

"Thank you, Tango," she said. He nodded, nonplussed. He'd never seen someone exhibit *that* much self control before. "Sausage, there are a couple of men out there who need to be cut off. It's probably best that you do it."

Sausage's face went stony, and for a moment, Tango thought he was going to have to stop a murder for the second time that night.

"Did they hurt you?" he asked, turning Gem to face him, so he could look her over, in case she tried to lie to him.

"I hit the ground pretty hard," she admitted, "but nothing that won't heal or bruise by morning."

"You wait here, watch the food." Sausage said, passing over the towel he'd had wrapped around his hand to protect it from the iron handle of the pan, and the wooden spatula he was using. The care Gem used as she took them made Tango wonder if she was thinking about how easily they could be turned into weapons, in the right hands. Tango was sure, at that particular moment, that hers were the right hands. He was pretty certain that if Gem had managed to get hold of so much as a spoon, the night would have been going very differently.

“Tango,” Sausage said, and it was clear it had taken a few tries to get Tango out of his own head enough to hear it, “Come with me, and look intimidating.”

“Sure,” Tango agreed. Unlike some men he knew, he didn’t disarm himself to eat. Maybe that marked him as untrusting and *untrustworthy*, in some people’s eyes, but no one had so much as turned to look at him when he did it. The heavy leather hung around his hips, a weighty reminder of where he’d been, and who he’d stolen from, not once, but *twice*, if you counted souls.

They pushed through the door, and Tango’s eyes immediately went to the table where he’d last seen Jimmy.

“Which table, Tango?” Sausage asked, but Tango didn’t respond. His blood was too busy going cold. He didn’t see Jimmy. The floor felt like it was rocking under his feet, going too fast, getting too close to the line of explosives he’d set. He scanned the room again, like it would change the facts, and then swore.

He sped through the room, ducking between tables, and snatched Jimmy’s gun belt off the table. Sausage was hot on his heels, seeming to notice a moment after Tango that there was a notable *lack* of sheriff in the saloon.

He was halfway to the batwing doors when the *bang-whizz* of a pea-shooter shattered the relative calm that had resettled over the room.

He froze with the rest of the room, but when the first shriek sounded and they all surged toward the back of the saloon, washing Sausage away with them, Tango pushed forward against the crowd, the only sound in his ears the echo of the devil’s laughter.

He burst into the night air, feeling as though his skin were on fire.

It took him a moment to parse the scene in front of him.

The first thing he noticed was the gun, then the man holding it. He wasn’t looking at Tango, which was a mistake. Instead, his eyes were scanning the area that Tango assumed (hoped, *prayed*, even though he was certain no one was listening to what *he* had to pray for) Jimmy had gotten to. The second man that had been at the table had whirled at the sound of Tango stumbling through the doors, and was pointing a gun of his own at him.

Until the noise started.

It started small, a low whine that quickly sped into a whistle. It bounced off the walls and across the road, dancing in the air around them. The men turned, and Tango wasn’t ashamed to say that he fell for it too, looking for the source of the strange whistling noise that he noticed, a moment sooner than the others, was the sound of rope swinging in the air.

Tango took advantage of the distraction and leapt off the side of the porch attached to the saloon. He crouched low, so that he wouldn’t be seen quite as easily, and watched as the man after Jimmy, the one who’d fired his weapon, slid sideways as the eerie noise ceased.

He hit the ground, and the gun skittered away across the dirt road. It was only then that Tango made out the sight of the rope around the man's chest.

He could have laughed. He really, truly could have laughed at the absurdity of his sheriff. He wouldn't use his guns in a firefight, but stick him next to the stables, and he could win one with a lasso.

Tango moved the moment the second man did. He thought, for the briefest of moments, about using one of Jimmy's guns. It would be quicker, easier, cleaner, probably.

But there was something that felt *off* to him about using the guns when Jimmy had refused to.

He caught the man as he got to his friend and stopped the hand that moved to draw with a cold, silver-clear warning.

His scythe was sharp enough to cut the top layer off a blade of grass, and he knew it would be simple as pie to flick his wrist and cut off this man's hand. Easier still to kill him, probably. Tango didn't use these for that. They stayed on his person for one reason, and one reason only:

So that no one else could use them. Ever.

He'd watched them sever the soul from a man's body. That was the sort of power that Tango didn't think anyone ought to have, least of all him, but he didn't know who else he could pass them on to.

"I really would rethink that, if I were you," Tango said, trying to force down his anger with false cheeriness. He didn't think it worked. His voice came out strangled through his gritted teeth.

The man was staring down at the weapon on his wrist, looking like he was having a hard time comprehending the events of the evening. Tango let him wonder. With the second scythe, he sliced through the leather belt keeping his gun at his waist and caught it before it could hit the ground.

"Sheriff," he said, finally, *finally* seeing Jimmy in the gloom. "Need some help with these two?"

Jimmy had the other end of the lasso wrapped around his arm, keeping the line taut against the struggling of the man on the ground. His shoulders were tense, but when he looked at Tango, his face wasn't pinched in pain, and he looked relieved to see someone else there. He sent Tango a pinched smile.

"If you wouldn't mind," Jimmy said, his voice still in his "sheriff" tone. "I'll send word to the marshal first thing tomorrow, see if there's anyone else these two have tried this on."

Tango nodded to show he'd heard, but he was already focusing all of his willpower at simply walking the man to the jail beside the sheriff's office. He'd never been inside, but if he'd

decided not to play nice with Scar, decided that he'd rather hang and try his luck the second time around, he knew he would have gotten *intimately* familiar with it.

Part of him, a desperately vile part that had gotten used to the life of an outlaw, had even come to *enjoy* it at times, wanted to kick this man's legs out from underneath him and drag him the rest of the way for even daring to draw on Jimmy.

But he knew that his actions would reflect back on Jimmy, and the town as a whole, and he could hear Jimmy at his back, pulling the already downed man to his feet.

He took a deep breath, and reminded himself that he wasn't the one in charge, here.

He got the man into the cell, and then parked himself back outside, drinking in the night air like a man possessed. Jimmy finished the job of dispossessing the men of their weapons, figuring out who they were, locking them up, whatever it was that sheriffs did with folks like this, and when the door opened, Tango turned to drink *him* in, the sight of him rumped and a bit dirty, likely from where he'd thrown himself to cover when the first drunkard had drawn on him.

"Lucky you landed near the stables," Tango said, closing his eyes and letting his head rest against the side of the building again. He didn't like the way his voice sounded raw, too full of emotions.

"Lucky you came out when you did." Jimmy countered, coming around to stand next to Tango, out of the doorway.

"Damned lucky," Tango spat, fear twisting his words into something harsh, angry. "If I'd been even a second longer—" he still had Jimmy's guns over one shoulder. They weighed him down, heavy with the knowledge that Jimmy *would* have been quicker on the draw, if he'd had them on him. He'd seen the way that Jimmy moved when he wanted to. These men had been drunk as skunks, but even so, Tango would have bet that on their best day, they couldn't outdraw Jimmy.

"You weren't." Jimmy said softly. His voice was firm in the air between them, a full stop to the end of the sentence, and it *gutted* Tango. This was too much trust to place in one man, let alone one who was barely reformed as it was. He shoved his palm against his chest, trying to push the emotions out, away from him. Trying to stop the fear that had rooted there, trying to stop the growing admiration for Jimmy, the growing friendship between them, the *something else* that had kept him here when he'd had such a clear and present opportunity to leave. The emotions stayed where they were.

Tango stood up straight and pivoted so that he was practically nose to nose with Jimmy. Jimmy blinked, startled either by the action or the proximity. It hadn't *felt* like they were close together, before, but now, with barely an inch of space between them, it was hard to ignore. The fear dissolved as Jimmy's eyes went from shocked to confused. Not afraid, not *concerned*, even. The trust was a railroad spike through Tango's heart.

He wanted it gone.

He wanted to be worthy of it.

Despite the fact that they were already too close, mind-numbingly close, *inexcusably* close, Tango stepped further into Jimmy's space.

The gun belt slid from his shoulder easily, like it knew it wasn't supposed to be there. *That makes two of the three of us*, Tango thought bitterly.

He couldn't look Jimmy in the eye, both because he would have had to crane his neck to do so—damned tall Englishman—and because he didn't think he'd be able to stand whatever he saw there. Jimmy didn't shove him away, though Tango noticed that he *did* seem to stop breathing. His chest stilled as Tango slipped his arms around Jimmy, looping the errant belt around his hips.

Jimmy shouldn't be letting him do this, that much was certain, but either he was too shocked to stop Tango, or...

He was too shocked to stop him. Tango wouldn't even allow himself to consider an '*or*.'

Tango almost hated how well the belt framed his hips. It had nearly taken his breath away the first time Jimmy had put the blamed thing on, and that wasn't something he cared to examine. He hoped Jimmy hadn't, either.

As Tango let go of the belt, letting it rest where it was meant to, he swallowed roughly.

"You gotta," his voice broke. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried again, "You've got to keep these on you, man."

He still wasn't looking at Jimmy's face, couldn't bear to. Jimmy's hand twitched, an aborted movement that he stopped before Tango could figure out what he'd been moving to do.

"D'you remember how we were talking about mythologizing the other day?"

"Yeah," Tango said, his voice a whisper in the dark. If he were feeling contrary, he might have lied, said that he couldn't remember the conversation in the car, while Tango thought about all the people he was being introduced to and would probably get killed.

But he could feel the warmth from Jimmy's chest *nearly* against his own. Jimmy hadn't stepped away, even though he should have the second they didn't have an excuse for their proximity any longer. The tremor in Jimmy's voice was almost enough for Tango to look at him, but he was terrified of what he'd see if he did. Instead, he did him the service of not pretending he'd forgotten the conversation.

"That's why."

"Why what?"

Jimmy moved at last. Tango found himself following the movement of Jimmy's hands as he reached up and lifted his hat off to shove them through his hair. The second Tango looked at him again, it was like a dam had broken, and the words tumbled over each other, trying to be

the first to explain. “It’s *why*,” he started, as if those two words explained everything. “Why I got so irritated with Pearl for not apologizing. Why I left my belt on the table. Because you’re wrong.”

Tango’s mouth dropped open, offended. Jimmy held his hands up in surrender, and then reached out to grip Tango’s shoulders, like he was afraid Tango would march off without hearing the rest of what he had to say. “It’s *different*, Tango. Different for her to shoot a man, and for that man to be *you*. It’s like... you can idolize a concept, but the second you live it, it’s not what you thought it would be. You can shoot a man, but as soon I know his name, he’s a *person*, and—and *he* means more to me than the bullet.”

“What happens when someone like *that*,” Tango gestured at the door, accidentally shaking off one of Jimmy’s hands as he did so. He didn’t let himself mourn the warmth it brought him, “gets the drop on you again? If I—or, or Sausage, or Gem, or *someone*—can’t get there in time to help?”

Jimmy opened his mouth, probably to say something like *it doesn’t matter*, but it *did* matter, so Tango didn’t let him. He gripped Jimmy’s other hand, the one still on his shoulder.

“Please,” he heard himself saying, begging someone else for something for the first time in his entire life, “not just for me, but for the rest of the town, for Grian and Pearl, *keep them on you*.” They were close enough that Jimmy couldn’t just look him in the eyes, and Tango watched as he took in what Tango was asking, his gaze flitting from one of Tango’s eyes to the other. “You’re going to need them again, and I want to know that *you’re* the man that walks away when you do.” The words hung in the air between them, hungry to take up space, and hungrier still for a response.

“Alright,” Jimmy said, his voice barely a whisper in the air between them.

Something inside of Tango settled, briefly, before the fire that was always under his skin seemed to surge. For a moment, all he could feel was a feverish whirlwind inside of him, or, more accurately, *beneath him*, before a gust of wind blew out the lantern illuminating them.

Jimmy looked away from Tango, one hand reaching up to keep his hat on, as the other slid out from beneath Tango’s grip.

The whirlwind seemed to settle, and Tango realized that all Jimmy had noticed was the wind. He reached out and flicked the oil lamp, trying to see why it had snuffed out.

“How strange,” Jimmy said, entirely unaware of anything *actually* strange that had just happened. Tango swallowed down fear and bile as it dawned on him that somehow, some way, he’d just made a very big decision for the two of them.

HOW EMBARRASSING FOR ME, anyway hope y'all enjoyed, please let this extra little Tango POV tide you over until I post today's actual chapter :P

[My tumblr](#)

[Hybbart's Tumblr](#)

[Foxyola's Tumblr](#)

Way Down the River

Chapter Summary

Jimmy wrestles with his past while tangling with the troubles of the present.

Chapter Notes

Oh look! It's chapter seven! -sweats-
And I got it in a full hour before my self-imposed deadline, so it's still Monday! Woo!
Enjoy 14k of Jimmy doing his best!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He and Tango had fallen into a rhythm, after that first day together. They'd wander downstairs at around the same time, the sounds of one of them loud enough to wake the other through the walls, and spend the morning with Sausage, catching up on the happenings of the night prior, so Jimmy would know if there were any visitors that he needed to keep an eye on. He'd finally introduced Tango *properly* to the rest of the long-term residents of Del Sombra. He and Shelby had gotten along more famously than Jimmy had really expected, and Tango had also immediately taken a liking to Cub, though Jimmy still found himself slightly unsettled by the man's demeanor around blood. Privately, Jimmy wondered if he liked stitching his patients back together a little *too* much.

He'd also immediately struck up a rapport with Cleo, and if Jimmy ended up elbows-deep in paperwork, he knew he'd often find Tango at the general store, asking Cleo all manner of things about Del Sombra, or with False, begging for scrap metal to build his prototype sprinkler for Grian.

He'd noticed, on finding Tango there, once, that he'd left his gun belt on a hook by the door. It had taken him a minute to remember what Pearl had said.

Take those out into the desert and forget where you bury them.

What could be so strange about a set of sickles, he wondered. He'd thought about asking while he talked with Stress, both of them waiting for the conversation on the other side of the room to finish. But instead, he'd let the subject drop, figuring Tango was owed that secret, since he hadn't asked for Jimmy's.

Stress, he found, was *wonderful* to be around, even beyond a business capacity. After a few stilted-to-warm conversations about the animals in their care, he swung by one day to find

Tango and False arguing about something technical, and Stress beamed at him.

“Take a drink every time one of them says the word ‘comparator,’” she ordered, pulling out a bottle and an extra glass as he sat down.

“I’m... Stress I’m on *duty*,”

“By the time they’re done, so’ll you be.” She said, pouring him a *very* full glass. Judging by the state of her own, she’d been at it for a while. Or, if she’d been playing the game, maybe not very long at all.

He’d spent the next morning nursing a hangover, and bone-sure that he’d spent the walk back to the boarding house telling Tango how smart he was while Tango made sure his feet didn’t fall out from under him.

Tango had greeted him with a smirk and Jimmy had subsequently locked himself in the office and pretended to catch up on his paperwork until the blush faded from his face.

Grian and Pearl had come down a now and again, and by the fifth time they’d come into town for a visit or for their groceries, Pearl had been sending Jimmy worried looks.

“I’m just concerned,” she said, once, cornering him in the office. “He’s a criminal, Jimmy. Are you sure you should be getting so... involved?”

“What, do you think he’s going to kill me?”

“I don’t know, Jimmy! We don’t know anything about him,” she huffed, not aware of how wrong she was.

Jimmy knew more about Tango than he thought Tango ever meant him to.

He knew how Tango liked his coffee, and that he preferred Sausage’s *chorizo* to the bland things that he served to the folks passing through. He knew that he’d spent a full few days (and sleepless nights) figuring out a way to safely light up the mines, once he realized that electricity hadn’t made it to the miners here, yet. He’d knocked on Jimmy’s door once, not realizing it was the middle of the night, and talked to him at a mile a minute, either not realizing that Jimmy couldn’t keep up, or not minding, so long as he could talk it through with *someone*.

He’d fallen asleep on Jimmy’s shoulder after admitting that he’d lost his own parents due to a fire in the coal mine their town was built on. When Jimmy had apologized, he’d patted Jimmy’s head.

“Meh, it’s *almost* okay, because that’s how I met Impulse and Zedaph.” He’d said, before his head fell onto Jimmy’s shoulder, his neck officially too tired to keep it upright.

Which was how he *also* knew the full names of every single member of the long defunct Zitters Gang.

He knew that Tango's favorite color was red, but when Jimmy had asked if that was why his belt was dyed such a strange shade, his face had twisted. "No," he'd grumbled, "that's a coincidence. I just stole it from a man who deserved stealing from."

He'd tossed a smile to Jimmy that Jimmy had quickly come to recognize as one of his fakes, and that had been the end of that conversation.

That had been how he'd realized he knew that some of Tango's smiles weren't entirely genuine, and his temper could outstrip Jimmy's any day. He'd nearly had to throw Tango back in the holding cell overnight because a man accused him of cheating at cards.

"If I was cheating, you'd know, Jim," he'd seethed as Jimmy dragged him bodily away from the fight that was brewing, "That man just couldn't tell an ace from an arrow in his eye."

Hands down the worst thing Jimmy knew, however, was that Tango was a good man. A better man than he'd ever gotten the chance to prove. Dangerous? Sure. Absolutely. Jimmy had seen how he handled the colt that he hid under his pillow. Tango had used it well enough that for a moment, Jimmy forgot that it was a *gun*, and not an extension of Tango's arm.

Jimmy hadn't once had to ask him to honor the bargain he'd struck with Scar. Even on the morning that he'd given Tango the opportunity to leave, Tango just *stayed*. And stranger still, he stayed with *Jimmy*. He could have easily ended up as nothing more than Jimmy's neighbor, only checking in with him when he needed to for the sake of his community service, but he hadn't. Jimmy didn't bother pretending it meant something *more*, but it did mean *something* to him.

It meant that Tango had every chance to break his heart, now.

"Everyone deserves a second chance," he'd said to Pearl, trying to bite back the irritation at her words. *You can't make this choice for me*, he wanted to say, but couldn't, because that would imply that a choice was being *made*.

Jimmy tried to convince himself that everything felt around Tango was purely involuntary. At night he created a list of all the reasons that wanting anything more than friendship with Tango was bad, trying to talk himself out of the way his heart would beat just that much faster around him, or the way he couldn't see Tango's smile without one of his own sliding into place. The list was no less than fifty lines long, and included everything Pearl could think of, and more. Every single line went up in a puff of smoke the second he thought of the one reason on the other side of the equation: *it's Tango*.

Pearl hadn't said another word about it after that, though he could feel the way her eyes followed him now and again, as if she were already mourning him. Jimmy didn't know if he could completely blame her.

Eventually, Tango declared his prototype and his designs "complete... mostly," and even though Jimmy couldn't think of a reason for them *not* to go, he was still loath to have Pearl look at him like he was being the stupidest man alive, and even more reluctant to have Grian remind Tango that there was a smart sibling in the family, and that Jimmy wasn't it.

Still, when Tango asked, off they went.

The air had been cooling steadily as Tango settled into life in Del Sombra, and today was no exception. Tango didn't seem to mind the brisk air, but quietly, Jimmy thought that if he planned to stay through the winter months, they'd need to pick him up some warmer wear. He made a mental note to talk to Scott about it at some point. He knew he'd have to pay for the task in conversation as well as in cold hard cash, and more specifically in a conversation that Jimmy had been dodging for weeks at this point, but it would probably be worth it.

Probably.

He hoped.

When they came into view of the corral, Jimmy felt his mouth drop open, because the first thing he saw was the barn.

Well, the *bones* of the barn. But even he could see it in his mind's eye.

Beside him, Tango whistled.

"I'm gonna kill him," Jimmy muttered. Tango looked at him, confused.

"Isn't that where you wanted it to be?"

"Yeah, but he didn't *tell* me he was doing that," Jimmy protested, "and watch, he's going to pretend it was his idea all along."

Tango snickered at his dramatics, and when Grian greeted them with a loud cry of "Well howdy doodily, sheriff! How do you like where I placed the barn?" he didn't quite hold back the giggle that followed Jimmy's groan.

"You're the worst," Jimmy called back.

"It's a *much* better place for it than over by the house, I think. Don't know why anyone would think *that* was a good idea!"

"Really? I never would have guessed!" Tango called back as he followed Jimmy's lead and dismounted. Jimmy whipped around to face him.

"*Judas!*" he hissed, though the little blasphemy carried far less heat than it would have if it hadn't been Tango saying it and grinning all the while. Tango winked at him.

"I ain't kissed you yet, so let's not go *that* far," he whispered back.

Before Jimmy could begin to process the word *yet* next to the word *kissed*, Grian was calling out again, much closer this time, his voice harder to ignore.

"Having the barn there carries far less risk of spreading fire if something were to happen," he said sagely, as if the argument had always been his, and not Jimmy's.

“Well,” Tango began, as if he’d planned it. For a moment, Jimmy was reminded of Scar, on the first day they arrived. He almost expected Tango to say *it’s our lucky day*, but instead, Tango patted the prototype sprinkler he’d built, “if it’s fire you’re worried about, have I got you covered or what!”

Grian hooked an arm around Jimmy’s shoulders, forcing him to bend down or risk pulling his brother’s arm out of its socket. He refused to admit that Grian *was* strong enough to shove him around in the slightest.

“Let’s talk shop, eh sheriff?” Grian asked, poking Jimmy in the ribs. Jimmy tried not to think about how, if he’d ever looked impressive in front of Tango, that image was *entirely* gone now. He glanced at Tango, whose smile had never left his face, but it *had* changed, slightly. This was something that Jimmy hadn’t been able to figure out about Tango. Sometimes his smile did this *thing*, and Jimmy couldn’t parse it. Every time he tried, the only thing he came up with was the image in his mind of how Scar’s face always looked when he thought Grian wasn’t looking at him.

That, Jimmy thought, made no sense at all.

“Oh, and next time you stop playing sheriff, will you swing by Scott’s? I’ve got an order in.”

“Oi, I’m not *playing* anything,” Jimmy protested, even as he let his brother steer him inside. He hadn’t shoved Grian off, though, because unlike Grian, *he* was paying attention to the little details. He’d noticed that Grian looked a little paler, the shadows under his eyes a color they hadn’t reached since they were officially ‘on the lam.’ He couldn’t help it when the next thing he said was “Are you okay?”

Grian took his arm back and shoved Jimmy away with a palm smushed against his cheek.

“Fine, fine,” Grian said, affecting a calm that Jimmy didn’t see in his posture. Jimmy sighed and let the subject drop. “Tango, show me what you’ve got!” at that, at least, Jimmy thought that Grian’s excitement was genuine.

From there, the conversation went entirely over Jimmy’s head. He watched for a moment, and then went in search of something to do that *didn’t* involve staring at Tango as he explained something that he’d already relayed to Jimmy a hundred times.

Jimmy couldn’t help it if he never got tired of the way Tango’s face lit up when he was talking about the things he loved.

At some point while he was washing up in the kitchen, he heard the voices move away from the table, but he didn’t pay it much mind. He focused on the repetitive familiarity of the task, murmuring at cat-Pearl as she wove between his legs, meowing as if trying to tell him everything he’d missed while he’d been gone, or complaining that she had new competition to contend with for her dinner.

It wasn’t until he wandered outside, a pitchfork over one shoulder, and a bucket to refill the trough with in the other, that his heart stopped.

For a moment, all he could see was the way that the shadows curled on the barn, as if shielding it, the stark contrast of Tango's familiar silhouette and what must have been Grian's, his shadow elongated and towering over Tango's, thanks to the flames.

It took that moment of breathless fear for Jimmy to realize that there wasn't a *fire*, but instead a small, tame thing that Grian and Tango had started in a bucket, so that Tango could demonstrate how he would hang the sprinklers from the support beams in the roof of the barn. The breath left Jimmy's lungs in a *whoosh* of relief. Grian leaned closer, fascination clear in the grin on his face. Jimmy glanced at the shadows on the barn again, shivering at how strangely warped his brother's shadow looked. Grian must have been closer than it seemed from this distance, because his shadow didn't shift an inch.

Then, after a breath and a beat, he let himself look over at Tango.

Tango's neckerchief was up over his nose and mouth, and Grian was covering his own face with his handkerchief. Tango had a pair of tinted spectacles on his face, protecting his eyes from the flame. He'd seen False wearing something similar, a time or two. Stress had called the thing Tango was using a "soldiering iron" and False had corrected her from across the room, a smile in her voice, if not on her face, and told Jimmy it was a "soldering iron." Spelled similarly, said differently.

In the flash of the soldering iron, Jimmy could see Tango as a bandit. He could see how Tango might look to others, as he held up a bank, or robbed a train. He tried, but he couldn't find it in himself to be scared. He knew, under that neckerchief, was a grin bright enough to outshine the soldering iron in Tango's hand.

He tried to remember that Tango had mentioned that he'd gotten people killed.

Tried to remember that he carried a gun, and those two odd sickles.

Still, the fear wouldn't come.

"Oh," he murmured. "I'm in trouble," One of the horses nudged his back, and he sputtered a laugh. "Alright, alright, hold your—selves, I suppose."

Tango was still half in his own world when they left, but by the time the sun was setting, and they were rolling into town, he was back to talking a mile a minute, figuring out how best to fix up his prototype and make it *better*, make it something *incredible*.

"Sorry," he said, at length, turning to Jimmy with a sheepish look on his face. "I, uh, got a bit flusterated, huh?"

It was cute, Jimmy didn't say. He focused on keeping his face friendly, on not doing anything that would land him in trouble. *He's not interested*, he reminded himself, *once Scar's back, he'll head somewhere he can make a name for himself*. That, out of all of them, was the thought that sobered him enough that he felt his voice was almost normal when he spoke.

"Don't worry about it," he assured Tango. They handed their horses off to the guy helping Beef. "You don't need to apologize for the things that make you happy."

Tango didn't have anything to say to that, though to be fair, they were both immediately overwhelmed with noise as they neared the saloon next door.

Jimmy had been around people before. Hell, he'd been around a *lot* of people before, but he'd never thought he'd see this many folks in Del Sombra.

Tango whistled, long and low, his eyes scanning the crowd, "it's like they're *trying* to wake snakes," he murmured, just loud enough for Jimmy to hear.

Jimmy was inclined to agree. He settled his hat on his head and, with Tango at his heels, shoved his way through the crowd. When Sausage saw him, his face lit up in relief. Jimmy could see sweat beading at his temples, and his sleeves had been shoved—not rolled, that was the distinction—up to his elbows.

"Jimmy!" Sausage called over the din, he even *sounded* knackered, his voice thinning out at the edges and missing its usual spark. "Beef was just looking for you."

Fear lanced through Jimmy. With this many people in town, he worried that it was only a matter of time before someone snapped, and the usually calm saloon became a bucket of blood. He couldn't forget the gleam of a pistol in the moonlight, or the promise he'd made to Tango. One that, every time he'd thought about going against it, had left him feeling as though he were still holding Tango's hand in the shadows outside the jail.

"Rain check on the meal?" Jimmy asked, exhaustion pulling at his bones. Sausage nodded and opened his mouth to say something, before a shout caught his attention and he rushed off to put out any impending fires. Jimmy nudged Tango and nodded to a seat that had opened up at the bar. "No point starving yourself."

Behind him, Jimmy heard Tango ordering and sighed. He'd really grown to love the job that Scar had given him, loved the people of Del Sombra, loved knowing they were safe and in his care, but sometimes he wished all that didn't get in the way of the necessities: food, sleep, and *absolutely nothing else*, he reminded himself as he hopped up the steps to the boarding house.

The look of abject relief on Beef's face was enough to weather away all of Jimmy's little annoyance.

"Jimmy, thank heavens," Beef sighed. "Something's gone wrong with the train. Everyone had to get off. I don't know what happened *there*, but I do know that we've got more people'n we can house—"

"Well, give me a few minutes to clear out and you can use my room. I'd *say* we can talk to Alice, but I don't know how amenable folks'd be to staying in there. Doesn't this train have a sleeper?"

"No sir, this one's just the passenger train."

Jimmy swore.

“How many people need beds?”

“At least fifteen more,” Beef said, rubbing at his temples. Jimmy tugged at his earlobe, feeling a bit self-conscious at what he was about to ask, even though he *knew* it was common practice for travelers in America as well as for courting couples. Jimmy had gotten introduced to the concept while they were still running, and he’d wandered into a room to find it already occupied.

“Are you already bundling folks?”

“I hadn’t been,” Beef admitted, “not sure how well it’ll go over, if I’m honest. Tempers were a bit high earlier, on account of the sudden stop.”

“Well, I don’t see we have much choice, unless folks feel up to staying in a bed-house instead of a boarding house.”

Beef chuckled and winked at Jimmy. “You never know.”

~

Back in the Saloon, Jimmy’s eyes found Tango before he even realized he was looking. He was sitting at the bar, one leg crooked up to rest on the stool next to him, clearly pretending that he didn’t know what he was doing was the height of rudeness. A man was standing next to the empty seat, shooting Tango dirty looks that Tango pretended not to see as he ate and talked to an exasperated Sausage.

Jimmy thought he might melt.

Instead, he cleared his throat and, at the top of his lungs, began to speak to the assembled crowd of people.

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you all for your patience.” Jimmy began, and slowly began to explain the situation to the crowd, where they stood with the repairs, and the solution that he and Beef had found to the lack of available beds.

The saloon had never felt so full. Jimmy could feel all the eyes on him closing in, threatening to choke him. Anxiety pricked at the back of his neck. He felt too exposed, too seen. He couldn’t help but remember that night, a couple of weeks back, that had nearly ended with him being measured for a pine box. His gun belt hung heavy on his hips, a steady reminder of the promise he’d made. They hadn’t left arm’s reach since, and right now he was almost grateful for it. He finally thought he understood why Grian had avoided being the center of attention, when he could. It had been so strange to see his brother go from someone who hadn’t a care in the world whether people saw him, who had people flock to him like birds to a rooftop, to someone who had isolated them all so thoroughly.

“Thank you again,” he said, as he concluded his impromptu speech, still feeling every eye in the room on him. He felt his eye twitch and forced down memories of his school days. He didn’t have Martyn to laugh with him, to take the sting out of the feeling of public ridicule,

anymore. But he *wasn't* being publicly ridiculed, he was just giving information to a group of exhausted, irritated travelers. "If anyone needs me, I'll be at the bar."

He made his way over to Tango, who was looking at him with his brow furrowed, but when Jimmy got close, he slipped his leg off of the chair and Jimmy sat, grateful and exhausted.

"You said you had your brightest engineers working on the train," Tango said, and Jimmy heard the hurt in his voice.

"I'm a sheriff, not a priest," Jimmy said, "I'm allowed to lie."

Tango's mouth twitched, but some of the confusion and wounded pride lingered in his gaze. "Why did you?" he asked, after a moment.

"I didn't want to volunteer you," Jimmy assured him. "For one, I'd want to talk to you first, and for two, I know you're not a fan of trains."

Tango looked shocked for a moment. "What?" he asked, his voice smaller than Jimmy thought he meant it to be. He almost couldn't hear it over the crowd. "What do you mean?"

Something in Tango's voice made Jimmy feel like he'd said or seen something he wasn't supposed to.

"I mean," he stammered, wrong-footed, "you avoid the station like the plague, Tango. And you get this look on your face every time you hear the whistle. I just figured it was something you didn't want to talk about."

"Oh," Tango said. When he continued, it felt like he was picking words out of a pile, and trying to make a sentence out of them, "I mean, y'know, I like them... well enough. They're interesting, from an engineering perspective. I just don't have a lot of good experiences on them."

"Tango," Jimmy leaned close, so that Tango would be able to hear his words, no matter how softly he spoke, "I'm not making you go anywhere near it."

"I would though," Tango blurted. Jimmy sat back, surprised. Tango continued at a much more normal volume, "if you needed me to."

Before he could respond, Tango shoved an extra plate in front of him, signaling the conversation over, and Jimmy set in with a fury. He refused to think about the fact that Tango hadn't known when he'd be back, but had not only made sure he'd have a seat, but also made sure he'd be able to eat as soon as he did.

"What's with the bag?" Tango asked, nudging the little sack full of Jimmy's possessions that he'd hastily bundled up and grabbed from the room he'd been staying in.

"Oh, right. Like I said, it'll be crammed in the bunkhouse. I offered up my room, so Beef had a little more to work with," he shrugged at Tango's half-offended face, "It's only until the train gets fixed and these folks can be on their way."

“You--” Tango grumbled, more irritated on Jimmy’s behalf than he thought he’d be, “where are you going to stay?”

“Looks like I’m bunking in the office again.” Jimmy said, trying to make a joke out of it, but Tango wasn’t biting. He shook his head sharply.

“Bull,”

“What?”

“I got more bed than I know what to do with.” Tango’s voice was even, but his tone was impassible, “Bunk with me.”

Jimmy blinked as the words sunk in, and then felt his cheeks heat. He felt like he’d been shoved out of a cart and left to tumble down a hill. He took a shaky breath, dizzy-drunk on the surety in Tango’s voice, at the thought of such prolonged proximity. He wouldn’t do Tango the disservice of asking if he was sure. *It’s only until the train is fixed. That could be tomorrow*, he reminded himself. “Alright.”

“‘Alright’?” Tango echoed, sounding shocked that Jimmy had agreed, or at least that he’d agreed so quickly. Had he folded *too* quickly? Suddenly, he was terrified that he had. He shoved that down and tried to sound normal when he spoke.

“Yeah, alright.”

“Well... alright, then.” Tango agreed, his ears were red at the edges, the words halfway to a laugh. The word itself had lost its meaning. Or, maybe it had gained a new one for Jimmy. He couldn’t be sure.

They waited until the saloon emptied, people heading to the bunkhouse as instructed to get rooming assignments with the help of Beef and the conductor’s passenger roster. Jimmy was just glad he wasn’t asked to be involved with *that* bit. Even just the brief flurry of excitement was enough for him for the night.

He couldn’t deny the way his heart was racing at the thought of bunking with Tango. He knew that he’d been the one to bring it up, but the word *bundling* and all its extra connotations were floating around his mind as they said their goodbyes for the evening and headed back to Tango’s room.

“Make yourself at home,” Tango said, opening the door to let them both in. He grinned at Jimmy, amused at the situation, and Jimmy did his level best to ignore how much he truly *liked* that smile. “Such as it is.”

The room was the same approximate dimensions that Jimmy’s had been, but with the two of them, it seemed so much smaller.

Jimmy realized, abruptly, that he had no idea how to navigate this situation. His actions, he knew, held no more gravity to Tango than they would have to any stranger, but *Jimmy* knew he’d need to watch himself, ensure that he didn’t overstep.

He could see Tango in his periphery as Jimmy pulled off his boots. He focused on his own movements as hard as he could, narrowing in as he pulled off his boots, and then on his shirt, which had never before been folded in such a pristine fashion.

“Huh,” Tango said, and Jimmy, entirely by accident, stopped being careful. He glanced over at Tango, who had a wad of bandages in one hand, his neck bared to the air. He was running his fingers over the raised line of scar tissue where the bullet hole should have been.

Jimmy tore his eyes away again as Tango rolled the bandages up and moved to continue to undress.

After a minute, he heard a snort of amusement and glanced up again.

“Sleeping in your Levi’s?” Tango asked, “and here I thought that first night was just because you forgot you needed a place to sleep.”

Jimmy flushed. He couldn’t think of a good enough reason *not* to dress down for bed, so instead he shucked off his trousers before he could overthink it. He sat on the bed, on the side closest to the wall and tried to figure out how to leave more than enough space for Tango.

Tango sat on the edge of the bed, his back to Jimmy as he swore at the knot on his bootlaces. If Jimmy were more confident, he thought he might have taken the pink on the back of Tango’s neck for a blush, instead of being the influence of the sun.

Jimmy’s eyes wandered to Tango’s shoulders and he took in a sharp breath. He could see the healed-pink of scar tissue on his shoulders, stretching down beneath Tango’s undershirt. He stopped himself, curbing the instinct to reach out. The skin was raised and pink, smooth-looking, and obviously had been healed a long time. A burn scar, Jimmy had no doubt.

“Does it hurt?” Jimmy asked, only barely remembering that that was probably a rude question. Tango craned his neck to see what Jimmy was looking at, then reached back and ran his fingers across the space Jimmy had only just stopped himself from touching.

“Oh,” Tango said, quietly. “Uh, no. I can’t feel it. I didn’t even know it was still there.” Tango sounded pensive, a little startled at the revelation. Jimmy nodded, wishing he could smack some sense into himself.

“Good. That’s good. That it doesn’t hurt, I mean.”

Tango shot him a smile over his shoulder. “I knew what you meant,” he said, chuckling a little. Jimmy wanted the earth to swallow him. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For... I don’t know. Being concerned?”

Jimmy opened his mouth, ready to argue that *of course* he was concerned, but stopped himself at the look on Tango’s face.

“You’re welcome,” he said, instead. Tango succeeded in shucking off his boots, and Jimmy focused on laying down. It was a very intensive process that took all of his attention.

Tango yawned next to him and muttered a sleepy, “Night, Jim,” that Jimmy acknowledged with a hum that was closer to a squeak.

He had an early morning, he knew he needed to sleep, obviously, but...

They’d had a wall between them, before. And now Jimmy was intensely aware of every shift in Tango’s movements, every hitch in his breathing. He was close enough that Jimmy could feel the warmth radiating off of him like a small sun as he settled into unconsciousness.

It felt simultaneously like both hours and minutes had passed when he noticed Tango stop breathing altogether. He rolled over, trying to see if something was wrong, when Tango started to breathe too quickly.

In the moonlight that filtered in through the window, Jimmy could see Tango’s face creased in panic or pain, and Jimmy felt his breath catch as he realized that he was witnessing something he’d only *heard* previously.

Automatically, Jimmy raised his hand to knock at the wall, the noise that had seemed to be able to wake Tango up with ease every time Jimmy had noticed him having a nightmare, but he stopped himself. There were other people in that room. People who would not take kindly to a stranger knocking on their wall in the middle of the night, sheriff or no.

He leaned in close, still dead careful not to touch Tango. He gripped the sheets tightly in his fist to stop himself from reaching for Tango as he started to shiver.

“Tango,” he hissed, ignoring the way that his heart stumbled and splintered at the sight of Tango in so much distress. It was just a dream, Jimmy tried to remind himself. It didn’t work, seeing as Jimmy knew the worst nightmares were borne of memories, at least in his experience. “*Tango*,” he hissed.

Tango whimpered, and Jimmy’s resolve broke. He reached out and laid a careful hand on Tango’s arm. He didn’t bolt upright at the contact, the way that Jimmy would have done, so Jimmy gave him a little shake. “Wake up, *please*,” he said, leaning in close so that he knew Tango could hear him.

Tango hissed, the sound low and pained. He curled in on himself, and Jimmy could see his hands trembling. He shook Tango again, trying to dislodge the dream, and spoke, a little louder.

“Tango, sweetheart, wake up,” he said, trying not to sound like he was begging, “you’re okay,” he added, trying to ignore the way that it felt like Jimmy was trying to convince *himself* of that.

With a sound like a choked-off scream that Tango instinctively muffled with his palm, Tango shot upright, his chest heaving, his eyes wild and brighter red than ever in the glow of the room.

“Hey, hey,” Jimmy said, unconsciously adopting the same tone he used for a spooked horse. He kept hold of Tango’s arm, rubbing soothing circles into his skin with his thumb, “it’s okay. You’re safe.”

For a moment, all that he could hear was Tango’s heavy breathing. Then, Tango reached up and gripped his hand, holding it the way a sailor would hold onto the rigging in a storm.

“Sorry ‘bout that,” Tango said into the darkness. His voice was thick, wet, and Jimmy’s heart broke for him, just a little.

“Don’t mention it,” he said. Then, “what do you need?”

Tango shook his head. The shoulder under Jimmy’s arm raised. A clear sign for *I don’t know* if Jimmy had ever seen one.

“Don’t—” Tango began.

“Yeah?”

“Don’t leave?” Tango asked, sounding uncertain. “It helps, having you here.”

Jimmy didn’t know how to tell Tango that there was no chance in hell that he was going anywhere. Instead, exhausted and coming down from the terror of witnessing one of Tango’s nightmares firsthand, he didn’t think about what he was doing. He slid his hand from Tango’s shoulder and hooked it around his waist, pulling Tango back against him, so Tango would know he was there. His hand came to rest, palm flat over Tango’s still-racing heart, and both of Tango’s own gripped his wrist, holding him there.

“I’m not going anywhere.” Jimmy promised. “You’re safe now. You’ll stay that way so long as I have anything to say about it.”

Tango nodded once, a jerky, confused movement. Slowly, Jimmy felt him relax. It felt strange, he thought, to have Tango so close, but there was a part of him that relished in it, that couldn’t help but be delighted that Tango had asked him to stay close. Jimmy felt Tango’s heart slow under his hand, and one hand slid away from the iron grip he’d had on Jimmy’s wrist. The other one stayed put, even as his breaths evened out and he started to snore softly.

~

The next morning, Jimmy woke to the feeling of Tango stirring in his arms. His palm was still pressed tightly to Tango’s chest, and, in the light of day, Jimmy flushed at the intimacy of the gesture. Tango’s other hand had fallen away from his wrist in the night, and Jimmy slid his arm free. He thought, for a moment, about pretending that he was still asleep, to steal another moment or two, but Tango was well aware of how early a riser he was, and Jimmy knew that such a pretense wouldn’t hold much water.

He scrubbed at his eyes instead and waited for Tango to wake up the rest of the way.

Tango woke slowly, in fits and starts, and Jimmy told himself that he wasn’t going to hold this knowledge close or think about it for the rest of his life.

It was easier to lie to other people than himself, though.

He watched the scar tissue on Tango's back stretch as he twisted onto his front and proceeded to shove his head under the pillow.

Jimmy couldn't stop the laugh that escaped him at the sight.

"Oh, g'won and laugh, you," he heard Tango grumble from underneath the pillow, "I'm suffering, and all you can do is mock me."

"It's just morning, Tango," Jimmy said, unable to stop the way his fond smile crept into his voice, "it comes every day."

Unable to put it off any longer, and just to prove a point, Jimmy sat up and stretched, letting his joints pop as they resettled, and grinned at the half-glare that Tango leveled him when he peeked out from beneath the pillow.

Jimmy raised an eyebrow at Tango, who was still glaring at him.

"You gonna let me out of bed anytime soon?"

Tango turned away at last, and mumbled something that Jimmy thought sounded an awful lot like *I don't want to*. Jimmy's cheeks heated, but he rolled his eyes, trying to play off the effect those words had had on him. That wasn't what Tango had meant, he was sure. Almost sure.

Even if he *wasn't* sure, he couldn't let what he wanted to believe be what dictated his actions.

The way he saw it, he had *three* things he could do, but only two were viable options: he could climb over Tango to get out of bed, or he could shove Tango onto the floor. Tango had opened up his room to Jimmy out of the kindness of his heart, so Jimmy was loath to go that route.

He tamped down any awkwardness and refused to let himself overthink it. He pulled the blanket he'd been using off of himself and used the headboard for balance, as he swung one leg over Tango. The bed jostled a little under his weight, and Tango pulled the pillow off of his face again. His cheeks were pink, though whether that was from the presumptuous position, or because he'd just had his head underneath a pillow, Jimmy couldn't be sure.

"What are you doing?" Tango demanded. Jimmy raised an eyebrow, doing his level best to channel Cleo at her driest moods. He was sure he didn't pull it off, his face was burning and his voice was rough with sleep.

"Getting out of bed," he said, ignoring what the sight of Tango, flushed beneath him, was doing to him. He swung himself the rest of the way out of bed and stretched again, using the movement to try and get his heartbeat and the flush on his face under control.

After a moment, he heard the sound of Tango getting out of bed as well.

They moved around each other surprisingly well. Jimmy was familiar with the sounds of Tango's morning routine, and Tango, clearly, was familiar with his, all that had really

changed was that they were doing these things in the same room, now.

They bumped into each other a few times, before they settled into a rhythm, and the habit of starting the morning *near* each other molded almost seamlessly into starting the morning *with* each other.

Jimmy tried to pretend that his heart wasn't hammering a mile a minute at the novelty of it.

The first divergence from their otherwise-ordinary routine came when Jimmy turned toward the saloon, and Tango didn't.

Jimmy stopped when he realized he couldn't hear Tango's footfalls on the ground beside him, and turned to see that Tango had his face screwed up into a grimace. He was rocking back and forth on his heels, as if trying to decide what foot to use to step forward, and his hands were balled into tight fists at his sides.

"Tango?" Jimmy prompted.

That seemed to at least get Tango's attention, his eyes caught Jimmy's, burning into what felt like Jimmy's own soul as he paid Jimmy a frightful amount of attention. Jimmy's heart stumbled over a few beats between them. "Mm?" Tango, then catching the gist of Jimmy's unspoken question, said, "Yeah, I'm not eating this morning."

"What? Why?"

"It's a toss-up right now on whether it'll be a waste of money. You go on ahead though," Tango rushed to add. "I'm heading to the station."

"Wh—Tango!" Jimmy protested, "I told you, you didn't—"

"You *said* you had your best engineers on it," Tango cut him off, hooking a thumb back at himself, "that means me. I'm not about to make a liar out of you."

"*Tango*," Jimmy said again, but he couldn't help the rush of fondness that crashed over him, or the way that a smile crooked his lips.

"Too late!" Tango said, starting to walk backwards in the general direction of the train station. "I'm doing it! It's being done!"

"Well," Jimmy laughed, at a loss for words. "When you're done being brilliant, come find me."

Jimmy hadn't *meant* to add that last bit. Tango was under no obligation to come find him, there was no reason for him to do so, aside from Jimmy wanting to spend time with him. Tango saluted, two fingers to his forehead. It was too far for Jimmy to tell, but he thought there might be a bashful tinge to his cheeks.

"Aye aye, captain," he called back, before turning on his heel and hurrying away. Jimmy figured the hustle was so he wouldn't be able to talk himself out of it.

Jimmy was at a bit of a loss. This was far from the first time they'd spent the morning apart, but something about it all—waking up next to Tango, and then Tango going to do something that Jimmy had *said* he didn't expect of Tango—

I would if you needed me to, Tango had told him.

Jimmy felt light enough that he thought he might float away as he headed into Sausage's alone. Even the teasing words the barkeep tossed his way, and Hermès's questions about Mr. Tango weren't enough to bring him back to earth.

The paperwork nearly did it, though.

Scar had left behind a *mountain* of paperwork. Even after working on it what felt like ceaselessly, Jimmy feared that he'd barely made a dent.

He sorted through reports and missives and wanted posters and *contracts*. The number of contracts that Jimmy didn't realize Scar had had to sign but had nowhere to file were obscene. One for the rail, one for Cub to come to Del Sombra, one for shoring up the structural integrity of the mines—it felt like they outnumbered the people in the town.

Jimmy had made piles on piles, trying to organize things in a way that wasn't Scar's laissez-faire style. As he moved to put the contract for supply orders from the city on with the rest, to be organized more thoroughly later, Jimmy bumped a pile he hadn't organized yet, sending it skidding to the ground.

He swore and shuffled all the papers back into his arms, careful not to dislodge anything he'd *already* organized, and dumped it back on his desk. He slumped in his chair, exhausted, and wondered idly when Tango would be done.

A flash across one of the mirrors caught something in the corner of the room, over by the cell, and Jimmy groaned.

He hauled himself up again, trying to decide if he could get away with going to find one of the cats in town to play with, and went to pick it up.

One of the papers on the stack had slid across the room, and when Jimmy picked it up, he was surprised to see a letter. Near as Jimmy could tell, Del Sombra didn't get much in the way of mail. At least, it wasn't organized right. He'd heard Grian complaining about the backlog and the mess it had made of the back of Mumbo's vault during one of their visits.

Sheriff Goodfellow read the name on the front. There was no address to be spoken of, and the curling red ink on the envelope filled Jimmy with a faint trickle of dread. He turned the envelope over, trying to tell himself that it wasn't a *letter*, it was just something from one of the residents.

On the back, in the same careful, curling script, was the name *Nicholas Goethe*.

Jimmy shivered.

He put the letter on the stack of missives for Scar and wiped his hand on his vest, feeling his skin crawl a little at the rust-colored ink on the pale paper.

The door opened, and Jimmy jumped nearly a foot in the air. His eyes shot to the door, a smile already half on his face at the teasing he felt sure to get from Tango, as a figure stepped inside.

"I don't think you've *ever* been this happy to see me," came a familiar voice, if not the one that Jimmy had hoped for. The silhouette in the doorway stepped into the room and pulled out a chair. If the accent hadn't given it away, the smirk would have. Jimmy cursed at himself for being so transparent.

"Oh, uh, hi Scott." Jimmy said, embarrassed that he'd been caught red-handed hoping for Tango to arrive. The smirk Scott was sending his way told him that he knew *exactly* who Jimmy had thought he might be.

"Jesus, don't sound *too* excited now." Scott snorted, dropping into the chair opposite the one Jimmy had just vacated and tipped it backward onto two legs. "You'll give a man whiplash."

"Sorry, sorry," Jimmy winced, "It *is* good to see you, Scott. I was just expecting... someone else."

"Uh huh," Scott said, "That doesn't explain why you're avoiding me."

A rush of guilt followed the words. Jimmy rubbed the back of his neck and grimaced. He hadn't been *avoiding* Scott—

"I've been *busy*," he protested. Scott raised an eyebrow, clear as crystal without words that he didn't believe Jimmy one whit. Jimmy sighed.

Jimmy hadn't *meant* to avoid Scott, but he knew how perceptive his friend could be. He'd already sussed out *ages* back that Jimmy was more keen on folks of the masculine persuasion, and Jimmy had known it would be a matter of moments before he picked up on how Jimmy felt about Tango. Or, rather, how Jimmy had been trying *not* to feel about Tango. It would have been impossible to lie about it to Scott without acknowledging the truth behind the lie to *himself*, so...

Okay, he'd been avoiding Scott.

"I've seen that." Scott nodded at the paperwork. "I've also seen some other things."

Jimmy sat back down and tried to hide behind one of the piles of completed documents. It wasn't nearly big enough to hide him.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he mumbled.

"For example, I've seen that I've got a coat on order for you that you need to be fitted for." Scott's voice was airy, unaffected, as if this wasn't a ploy to get Jimmy out of the relative safety of the sheriff's office and into the tailor's shop, where the roles would be thoroughly reversed, and *Scott* would be the one performing interrogations.

“I didn’t order a coat,” Jimmy said, suspiciously.

“You didn’t, but your brother requested that I fix up that monstrosity you showed up in town in. I refuse to touch it with a ten-foot pole, but I *will* make you something that doesn’t look like someone wove it while the sheep was still running around.”

Jimmy felt like all the warmth had left the room. If Grian wanted *that* coat fixed up, surely it meant that despite everything else pointing towards the contrary, Grian thought they might need to leave again, and soon.

Had Grian bothered emptying the pockets? If he had, had he bothered explaining the hole in the left one? There wasn’t a single resident of Del Sombra that would buy that it was from moths, if only because a self-respecting moth wouldn’t touch the damned thing.

“Grian won’t go for that,” Jimmy said, his voice quieter than he wanted it to be.

“He already signed off on it. Told me to make it something that a self-respecting sheriff might wear. And he handed me the *strangest* little contraption to go in one of the pockets.” Scott raised an eyebrow, reaching for the bag at his hip.

Before he could stop himself, Jimmy was standing, his hand on Scott’s wrist to stop him from moving. Dimly, he heard the chair clatter to the ground.

There’s no one else here, Jimmy tried to remind himself.

“Shall we go back to the shop, then?” Scott asked, as if it were a question that Jimmy could *possibly* refuse.

Jimmy stood, and, with all the gravitas of a man being marched to the gallows, followed Scott down the road.

Jimmy followed Scott inside the shop and was reminded that this was one of his favorite places in town, even if it was owned by one of the most cutthroat men Del Sombra had to offer. Jimmy grimaced at the sight of the coat on the counter, a black smear of ratted fabric that probably still reeked of the ocean. He hung his hat by the door and turned just in time for the coat to hit him in the face.

Yep. Still stank of saltwater and seaweed.

“Put it on,” Scott said, already rummaging behind the counter.

Jimmy’s grimace became a full-blown scowl, but he did as he was asked. It tugged uncomfortably at his shoulders, and Jimmy wondered for a moment if it had shrunk, somehow, before Scott snorted.

“Thought so,” he said, blithely. “You were such a twig when you got here, I knew there was no way that thing still fit.”

Jimmy made a wordless noise of protest. Scott only smiled innocently in the face of his ire.

“I’ll need new measurements,” he continued, when Jimmy couldn’t come up with anything beyond an offended ‘*hey!*’ in his own defense. He *had* been *lithe*—not a *twig*, no matter what Scott said—when they’d gotten there. Prior to coming to America, the only *real* physical activity Jimmy had ever engaged in was purely extracurricular. Scott pulled out a notepad that fitted to his wrist, his measuring tape, and a pen, which he tucked snugly behind his ear. Then, instead of gesturing for Jimmy to take his place in the corner of the room reserved for measurements and fittings, he leaned on the countertop across from Jimmy, and leveled him with an iron stare. “But *first*, you’ve got a share of explaining to do.”

Jimmy’s eyes flicked to the coat.

“Not about that,” Scott stopped him. “Well, not about that *yet*. First, I need to know what you think you’re doing with that bandit.”

“I’m not doing anything with him,” Jimmy said, automatically.

“You know you can’t lie to me, so don’t bother trying. Do you want to take another stab at that answer?”

Jimmy deflated. “I’m *not*, Scott. Nothing’s going on at all.”

“So, you’re not soft on him?”

Jimmy felt heat rush to his face, “I didn’t,” he began, but scrapped his sentence at the sight of Scott’s raised eyebrows, “I mean, I’m—that is,” he coughed, and then grimaced as Scott’s other eyebrow joined the first, “am I *that* obvious?”

“Clearer than glass,” Scott said, “plain as the moustache on our eccentric banker’s face.”

Jimmy’s shoulders slumped. He leaned heavily on the counter, mirroring Scott, though he knew he had to paint a real pathetic picture in comparison.

“Do you think *he’s* noticed?” Jimmy asked, looking at Scott beseechingly. He wanted the truth, but he almost wanted Scott to lie more. Tell him he was obvious, but not *that* obvious. Maybe tell him he was obvious, but that was just fine, because all the strange little things Jimmy was reading too much into *were* there, and Tango was just waiting for Jimmy to make the first move.

Scott’s eyes went soft, and his mouth turned down in an expression that Jimmy hadn’t seen on him before, but that Jimmy knew all too well. He groaned and buried his face in his arms. Scott’s hand found his hair, smoothing down the strands in an attempt to soothe him.

“Oh, *Jimmy*,” Scott sighed.

“Can we pretend I’m not wildly pathetic?” Jimmy asked, his voice muffled by the circle of his arms, and not at all thick from a sudden wave of horrified despair.

“No,” Scott said, his candor startling a laugh from Jimmy. This conversation was exactly what he’d been avoiding, but he *had* missed Scott’s way of making sure that no matter how

poorly he felt, he never left a conversation without a little reprieve, “but we can change the subject.”

His hand left Jimmy’s hair, and Jimmy stood up straight, trying to project the picture of sheriff, rather than that of a man hopelessly mooning over something he could never have.

Scott placed something on the table, and it landed with an ominous *chunk*. Jimmy glared at it like it had personally murdered his grandmother.

“You’ve used it, I can tell.”

“Yeah,” Jimmy admitted, feeling some of the fight leave him at the admission. “First and last time I ever aimed a gun at another person.” Jimmy looked up sharply, before Scott could get the wrong idea, and added, “I didn’t hit him, though. My aim was shit, but it bought us the time we needed.”

“This was back in England, then?”

“Yeah.” Jimmy said. He knew Scott wanted him to elaborate, but that night and the day that followed was a chaos of confusion in Jimmy’s mind, and time and distance had done those memories no favors. “Shot at a man, spooked a horse, caused a whole ruckus. Gave us enough time to clear off. We had enough headway, at that point, to get to the docks just in time to leave. They didn’t know what ship we were on.”

Jimmy didn’t add that he *still* didn’t know who’d been following them, or why, only that Grian had seen the man Jimmy shot at and had gone pale as a ghost. Jimmy had reacted, not caring if he was thinking logically or not. There wasn’t a single thing they’d done that evening, or the day following, that could have been described as “logical.”

For the sake of Scott’s patience, and his endless curiosity, he added “Duelling’s illegal in Britain, you know.”

Scott’s eyebrows shot up.

“That I do. But you don’t strike me as a dueling man.”

“*I’m not,*” Jimmy admitted, holding Scott’s gaze, a silent *this is all you’re getting, because it’s all I have*.

Scott waited for a moment, and then nodded. His eyes flicked to the windows and he waved Jimmy over to the part of the room he had portioned off for his fittings.

“First things first: right or left pocket?”

Jimmy felt his face screw up in another displeased expression. He could practically hear the sermon he’d get, not only at carrying a weapon, but also at the answer he gave. “Left,” he sighed. It didn’t matter how hard the schoolmarm had tried to beat it out of him, he never had quite gotten the same knack with his right hand as he did with his left, whether he was writing letters or using a gun.

Scott nodded, and Jimmy heard the sound of his pencil on the notepad. The bell above the door jingled, signaling someone else's arrival, but before Jimmy could turn to see who it was, Scott stepped up in front of him.

"Outer layers off," he instructed, "unless you want it to fit wrong."

Jimmy rolled his eyes. "Hold your horses, bossy boots."

"Be right with you," Scott called over Jimmy's grumbling. Jimmy felt more than a slight self-conscious. If it had just been Scott, that would have been one thing, but as he tugged off his vest and overshirt, he could feel another set of eyes burning into his back.

Maybe he was imagining it. He told himself he was imagining it, and the other customer in the room was simply browsing the shelves.

Scott circled him and pressed a hand between the shoulder blades. Jimmy followed the cue and straightened his posture, if a little confused at the fact that Scott had been so gentle, instead of poking or shoving at him.

Leftover pity, Jimmy figured. He bit back the urge to grumble at Scott and tell him to cut it out, because if he was honest, even if it *was* out of pity, Scott was still being nice to him, and he didn't want to stomp on that.

Scott stepped close, *bizarrely* close, far closer than usual, and measured first Jimmy's shoulders, then his chest.

Jimmy was afraid that he was as red as a tomato by the time Scott stepped back to lift his arms and measure his arms.

Scott was being *far* handsier than usual, and Jimmy couldn't for the life of him figure out why.

"What are you doing?" he hissed, as Scott stepped into his space again to measure his waistline.

"Updating your measurements," Scott said, tapping his little notebook with a smirk.

Jimmy caught a glimpse of movement out of the corner of his eye and was *finally* successful in craning his neck to see the other customer in the shop.

Jimmy felt his heart skitter. If he hadn't been bright red *before*, he certainly was *now*.

"Hey there, Tango!" he greeted, wishing he could channel some normalcy into his tone. Tango was wearing a carefully blank expression, his hands deep in his pockets again. His eyes were fixed on Scott, who continued working, seemingly without a care in the world. "I'll be done in a jiffy. Once we're done fitting me for a new coat."

Tango raised an eyebrow, his eyes suddenly on Jimmy again.

"If it's a coat, shouldn't you be wearing, I don't know, *clothes*?"

Jimmy blinked. He turned back to Scott, affronted.

“Scott!”

“What? I’m updating *all* your measurements at once; in case you decide to avoid me again.” Scott seemed utterly unperturbed by Tango’s strange mood, or by Jimmy’s displeasure. “It’s called *doing my job*, sheriff,” he drawled.

Jimmy raised his eyes skyward, wishing the ground would open up and swallow him whole.

“I hate you sometimes, I really do,” he sighed. Scott just laughed.

“Shirt and vest on, and I’ll get the rest, now.”

Ten minutes later, after Scott had finished measuring him, both in his daywear and *out* of it, much to Jimmy’s abject humiliation, Tango dragged him back outside.

“Oh, and Jimmy?” Scott called, and that tone hit the same alarm bells as when Grian was pretending to be innocent. Jimmy turned, even more suspicious than he had been. Scott wasn’t looking at Jimmy, though. He was looking at Tango, a sly grin on his face. “I’ve changed my mind. I think you’ve been about as clear as mud.”

“What’s *that* about?” Tango grumbled as Scott waved them goodbye and disappeared back inside.

Jimmy spread his hands, just as baffled. “Search me,” he said. Tango snorted.

“Oh, I think Scott already did that well enough for all of us.”

Jimmy’s face heated again, much to his chagrin. He’d only *just* gotten it to calm back down, and here he was, stuck feeling like he was sunburnt, even though he’d spent the better part of the morning indoors.

“I...” Jimmy began, but quickly realized that he didn’t know where to take the sentence. “I really don’t know what that was all about. He’s normally not like that.” Jimmy could feel Tango’s eyes on him again, but he couldn’t make his blush go down, and he was a little afraid of what he might see if he looked at Tango. Tango made a small noise in the back of his throat.

“Sorry, Jimmy,” Tango said, reaching out to brush his fingers across Jimmy’s arm. The touch didn’t linger, unlike the way Scott’s had earlier, but it felt like it burned through the fabric. Jimmy was aware of every point where Tango had made contact. “I’m not trying to be an ass. I know it isn’t my business, it’s just—It’s *just*...” Tango cut himself off with another frustrated noise, and, without a word, turned on his heel and marched back to Scott’s shop.

Jimmy stood there, nonplussed, and watched through the window as Scott turned a secretive smile on Tango. He leaned on the counter in a mimicry of the position he’d been in earlier, though this time instead of looking like a confidante, he looked like the cat that had got the canary. Jimmy wished for all the world that he could see Tango’s face. Maybe if he could, he thought, he could figure out what in the *world* Tango was talking .

A minute later, Tango came back out of the shop, looking far more even-keeled, if a bit contemplative. He jogged over to Jimmy, even though there was no risk of Jimmy wandering off, since he'd waited for Tango to finish whatever odd conversation he and Scott must have been having.

"Lunch?" Tango prompted, after a moment's silence.

Jimmy was all too happy to jump at the promise of normalcy and ignore the rest.

It wasn't until later, when they were crammed back into the small bed, and Jimmy had his back to Tango, trying to find sleep, that let himself wonder what it all was about.

He didn't find an answer, at least not one he'd allow himself to accept, before sleep took him.

~

The door to their—*Tango's*—room opened with a bang, the handle ricocheting off the wall, and Jimmy was upright before it had a chance to bounce.

So, it seemed, was Tango.

Despite his reluctance to wake the day before, he was wide awake now. He'd propped himself up on an elbow, his other arm was outstretched, and the gun in his hand was as steady as could be.

For his part, Beef only spared the weapon the smallest of glances, and put his hands up to show that he was unarmed.

Tango lowered the gun.

"We have a problem." Beef said, his voice still that ever-calming rumble. Tango and Jimmy shared a glance, and, almost in unison, moved to get ready, not bothering with the usual fluff of their routine. Jimmy barely had time to consider the potential problem before they were following Beef out into the hallway.

Jimmy straightened, the last of the sleep still tugging at his bones fading as he saw at the base of the stairs, one Alice Eakley, of the Florist's fame.

He was a bit surprised she hadn't marched up the stairs *with* Beef, until he saw who was on her other side, wringing her hands. A bruise stretched across her cheek, already darkening from red to purple at the center. New, but not *perfectly* fresh.

If Jimmy had to guess, and it was his job to guess, he was pretty sure they'd come as soon as Rose had woken up from whatever blow had given her that nasty bruising.

Rose shot to her feet and rushed at Jimmy, already halfway to sobbing out an explanation. He glanced at Alice for a translation, even as he patted Rose on the back, trying to soothe her. He wasn't nearly as comforting as Pearl would have been, he was sure, but he was the best Rose had, right now.

“It’s Daisy,” Alice said, her voice clipped and cool, as usual, but there were lines around her eyes that spoke to clear worry.

“One of the fools who got stranded with the train has it in his head that he’s going to marry her, whether she likes it or not.”

“Cleo saw him heading toward the train station this morning.” Beef put in. Jimmy’s lips thinned. Tango had told him the night before, after having clearly clambered out from *beneath* said train, that they’d managed to fix the issue, and that as soon as daybreak came the crew would be ready to leave again.

If Rose had woken up even an hour later, it was possible they wouldn’t have known about Daisy until it was too late.

“What happened to you?” Jimmy asked, directing the question at Rose. He handed her a handkerchief, given hers appeared to be half torn to shreds from where she’d been worrying at it.

Rose took a few deep breaths, using the handkerchief to wipe her eyes. Her voice wobbled as she spoke, “Mary—that is, *Daisy* and I bunk together—safety in numbers, you know—when we don’t have...” her eyes glanced to Tango and away and she lowered her voice, “overnight callers.” Vehemently, she added, “he *hadn’t* booked her time.”

“We’ll get her back, Rose,” Jimmy said gently, “it’ll be alright.”

Bonnie hiccupped out a laugh, and it was clear she didn’t entirely believe him, but she retreated back to Alice all the same. Alice folded her into a hug and she leveled Jimmy with a stare that spoke louder than any words could.

“I promise all of my girls a good life,” she said, her voice low and stern. “I’ve lost a lot of business and a lot of opportunity sticking to that promise, and I *won’t* have Mary getting hurt, you hear me?”

“You look after Rose, Miss Eakley,” Jimmy said, voice solemn as a vow, “I’ll get her back.”

A crash sounded from upstairs, and Beef swore, disappearing back up the steps two at a time. Jimmy took that as his cue.

Dawn was barely curling her fingertips over the ridge when they exited, and Jimmy shivered.

“Morning sheriff,” came a grave voice next to the door. Jimmy jumped, startled, but breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of a shock of red hair next to him. It was early enough yet that Cleo clearly hadn’t bothered tying it back. In fact, it looked almost like she’d done what they had, throwing on whatever she had to hand in order to be there as fast as she could.

“Morning Cleo,” he said at last, “who called you in?”

Her lips twitched. In the dark, Jimmy couldn't tell if it was a smile or a frown that she'd held back.

"It was the damndest thing," she said, "I was dead asleep, when all of the sudden I heard what I swear was Grian's voice, asking for me to wake up and help you. So, I woke up, and caught Miss Alice right as she went inside. Didn't take any kind of detective to realize she needed help, so I went back for Ol' Reliable here," she patted the stock of the rifle. "I already saw Keralis on the way over to the platform and told him to stay clear."

Jimmy breathed a sigh of relief, "Thanks Cleo," he said, checking one thing off his mental to-do list. It was a bit jumbled, both from the part of him that was frantically worried for someone he knew and considered to be almost-a-friend, and from the fact that he kept getting put into situations he'd never fathomed would come up. "Do we know if he's armed?"

Cleo chuckled darkly, "I'm not carrying this for show, Jimmy," she said, "it's what he hit poor Rose with."

Jimmy took in a shaking breath, terrified to ask his next question, but knowing how necessary it was.

"Do we know if Daisy is still alive?"

Cleo shook her head slowly.

"I haven't heard any shots, but I don't think it's likely that he would have killed her. Not if what Alice says about his reasons is true."

Jimmy closed his eyes, wishing he still believed enough in something to pray.

"People have killed for less," he said, refusing to think about Grian's hands. Cleo looked at him strangely, but seemed to decide against telling him he sounded like a lunatic. When it became clear that he wasn't going to elaborate, she spoke up again.

"Near as I can tell, he's locked himself up in one of the carriages," she said, "I swung around the station before I came back for you, and the second he saw me, he started waving the gun around."

"Not shooting?" Tango asked. Jimmy jumped, surprised that Tango was still beside him. He'd been moving silently, clearly already prepared to do what Jimmy hadn't considered, which was to make a far stealthier approach. "Jim, if he's not shooting, he might have a piece without any bullets to go with it."

Jimmy grimaced. He'd love to believe that, but...

"I don't know if we can take that risk," he said, at length. Tango picked at his lower lip as the station came into view. The three of them stuck to the shadows, hugging the wall of the station to avoid being seen as much as possible. If he'd already brandished the gun at Cleo, Jimmy didn't want to give him any extra reasons to try and pull the trigger.

Luckily for them, standing in the shadow of the building meant that they didn't cast any shadows of their own to give away their position. The sun was getting higher in the sky, shining down on the tracks now, and in the train car, Jimmy could see the man in question pacing the length of the car, clearly looking for any signs of trouble.

"Looks like you irritated him," Tango said. Cleo huffed.

"It didn't take much."

Jimmy couldn't see Daisy. He tried not to let that worry him, but the churning in his gut told him he'd failed.

"We need to get her out of there," he hissed. The man who'd taken Daisy looked agitated. Jimmy didn't like it when men who were armed looked agitated.

Tango gripped his elbow, turning him away from the train. He looked grim.

"I have an idea, but you're going to hate it."

"I *also* have an idea," Cleo chimed in, "but you'll probably hate mine, too."

"Does either plan involve shooting the man in the car, and potentially hitting Daisy with any backshot?" Jimmy asked, eyeing Cleo's rifle.

"No!" Tango sounded scandalized. Cleo shrugged.

"Maybe."

"Tango, what's your idea?"

"I can get onboard the train," Tango said. He didn't sound as sick at the prospect as Jimmy thought he might have the day before, "we might be able to get Mary out before anyone starts shooting."

"I tried getting in through one of the other cars," Cleo argued, "he locked the doors."

Jimmy made a horrified noise.

"You said you *swung around the station!*"

Cleo leveled him with an amused look.

"Yeah, I swung around the station, tried to get in, and when he saw me, he pulled out his gun. That's when I realized I'd need this pretty thing," she hefted her shotgun, "and some extra hands. *Anyway*—" she continued, even as Jimmy rubbed at his temples, "how do you plan to get into a locked train car?"

Tango looked at her and drew a box around his face.

"This ain't my first rodeo," he said, simply. "What I *need* is a distraction."

“Is that where I come in?” Jimmy asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Well,” Tango allowed, and then seemed to start his sentence over again, “well, who knows, you might even be able to talk some sense into him.”

“Doubtful,” Cleo snorted, “he doesn’t strike me as the listening type.”

“Take Cleo with you,” Jimmy said, “if Daisy’s unconscious, it’ll be easier for you to carry her with two people.”

Cleo nodded and shuffled closer to Tango.

“Give us five minutes,” Tango asked. Jimmy nodded. The words *be careful* stuck in his throat. There was no such thing as careful in a situation like this. Either it worked or it didn’t. Either they were careful, or they were dead. He and Tango seemed to waver for a moment, both on the verge of saying something, before Tango nodded, and he and Cleo vanished back around the other side of the station.

Five minutes saw the man in the car sitting down, looking for all the world as if he were waiting for someone to come through and ask if he wanted any beverages.

Jimmy still hadn’t seen Daisy.

He did, however, see a flash of orange in the sun, just behind the car that Jimmy had been watching like a hawk. If he focused, he could see a couple of shadows moving independently of the rest, too close to the car for the man of the hour to notice. As he watched, they seemed to shrink and fade away.

Jimmy straightened his hat and slowly, carefully, walked into view.

“Morning,” he called out, and the man jumped to his feet as Tango climbed onto the connector between train cars. Jimmy forced himself to focus on what he was doing, instead of what he could see in his periphery. He didn’t dare do anything to risk Tango’s life. He swallowed, feeling like he’d eaten a hearty helping of sawdust for breakfast. “My name’s Jimmy. I’m the sheriff here in Del Sombra.”

The man was staring at him, which was good, but was also pointing the gun through the window at him. Less good.

“Can you tell me if Daisy’s in there with you? I just want to make sure she’s safe and sound.”

“I would never hurt her!” the man replied, derision dripping from his tone at the very suggestion. “She’s better than safe. I’m taking her away from this town, so we can start a life together!”

“That sure is nice of you,” Jimmy lied. Tango was out of sight now. Jimmy didn’t know if he was *in* the car, or if he’d left it alone. He didn’t know which outcome was preferable. “Say, it’s a bit of a tradition here in town that we toast all newlyweds to their new lives. Why don’t you come on down from there—”

“No! We’d really just prefer to be on our—*what are you doing?!*”

Jimmy watched, horrified, as Tango came back into view, close to the back of the car, but *far* too far away from the door for comfort.

“Uh,” Jimmy heard Tango say, his voice almost nonexistent from the distance between them. “Bespoke... toasting services?”

The gun pointed from Jimmy to the interior of the car.

“Get back over here!” the man yelled.

Jimmy didn’t dare speak again. He started towards the train, trying to close the distance. The man still stood in front of the window he’d been threatening Jimmy through, but his eyes were pointed toward the floor of the carriage.

Toward Daisy, if Jimmy had to guess.

“C’mon now, Mister,” Tango said, louder now. Jimmy could hear a curl of panic in Tango’s voice. He took a few steps closer. “I’m just here to see Miss Daisy off, is all.”

“We all want this to have a nice, happy conclusion,” Jimmy put in. The man jumped, as if remembering he was still there. The gun in his hand wavered from Tango to Jimmy and back again, clearly having come to the conclusion that Tango was the bigger threat.

Jimmy didn’t like the way the gun was shaking. If he *did* shoot, he was liable to hit any one of them.

He slid his own gun free of its holster. He only needed the one, he told himself. A trickle of sweat dripped down his spine.

Scar would have talked this situation down, by now, a treacherous voice in the back of his mind told him. *Scar wouldn’t have gotten Tango caught.*

“Everybody off, ‘cept me and Daisy,” the man ordered, pointing the gun square at Tango’s chest.

Jimmy knew what he had to do. He even knew how to do it. He had the gun aimed at the man. No one would fault him for shooting. No one, save Jimmy himself.

“I’m not leaving without her,” Tango insisted. He took a step forward, closer to the gun. Closer to the man *holding* the gun.

Jimmy felt it, more than saw it, when the man cocked the hammer. He felt it in the way his heart slammed to a stop, the way his breath froze in his lungs.

For the second time that morning, he moved before he thought about doing it. The bullet shattered the window, an inch to the left of where Jimmy knew he *should* have aimed.

The man flinched back at the noise, and his own shot went wide.

Jimmy's ears rang. His heart pounded, sickeningly fast.

Tango wasn't standing where he had been a moment prior, and it took everything Jimmy had to move. First a single step, but then his body got the memo, and he broke into a run.

Dimly, he was aware of Cleo helping Daisy down out of the train car, but he only stopped for a moment to ensure she was okay. He didn't even know if it counted as stopping, if his feet kept moving him toward the train car. Toward Tango.

He skidded to a stop, his hip colliding painfully with the connector bar. A hand caught his shoulder before his momentum could tip him over the side. As if on instinct, Tango's other hand came up to curl around the back of his neck.

For a moment, all Jimmy could do was stare.

Thunder roared at the back of his mind, drowning out all other thoughts beyond *Tango, Tango, Tango*. His hands were shaking when he lifted them to frame Tango's cheeks. The skin under his palms was warm. He could feel the puff of Tango's breath on his face, and those burning red eyes fixed on him, warming him, reassuring him.

"Eyes on me, Jim," Tango murmured, when Jimmy finally pulled in a ragged breath. "Just look at me."

He realized Tango was trying to keep him from freaking out about the man behind him. Tango's body was curled protectively forward where he knelt at the edge of the train car, blocking anything but him from Jimmy's line of sight.

In that moment, Jimmy didn't care if the man was alive or dead.

He didn't know how to tell Tango that he couldn't have looked away if he wanted to.

"Y'know," Tango said, his voice shaking under a veneer of cheerfulness, "I think I'll stick to being a criminal. You law abiding citizens have a lot to juggle."

Jimmy wheezed out a laugh and tugged Tango close, not caring one whit when Tango lost his balance and crashed his full weight into Jimmy's arms.

From behind Tango, Jimmy heard a groan of pain. He ignored it in favor of feeling Tango's heartbeat, strong and steady—if still a little fast—against his own chest.

~

"You saved my life," Tango said later. It was the first thing he'd said since they'd left the saloon. They'd both gone through the day in a bit of a haze. Or maybe only Jimmy had. He had a vague recollection of wiring for a marshal, of getting pestered with questions, of Tango, solid and warm and *alive* at his side, but the details were blurred. Jimmy turned to him, narrowly escaping the vortex of his own thoughts in favor of focusing on Tango. Tango, who was twisting his shirt this way and that in his hands, having already begun dressing down for bed when he spoke. Jimmy swallowed and tried to remind himself that this was a perfectly usual sight. He realized that in his daze, he hadn't bothered getting a different room for the

night. He hadn't even considered being away from Tango, "I, uh, I dunno, I feel like I need to thank you for that."

"I didn't save your life," Jimmy said, sitting heavily on their mattress. "I, honestly, I probably only risked you more. I didn't shoot him when I had the chance."

"Yeah, and because you didn't, *he's* back on a train tomorrow with an escort, *Daisy* is safe and sound in her bed, and *I*," Tango came to stand in front of him, and reached out, hands hesitant, to mimic the position they had stood in earlier. They were closer, this time, than they had been. In order to reach him properly, Tango had to stand between Jimmy's legs.

Jimmy balled his hands into fists to stop himself from reaching out to Tango. He'd been forward enough with the physical contact as it was. Jimmy knew that Tango had picked up on how it grounded him, and that was the reason he'd done it earlier.

It was the reason he was doing it now, Jimmy reminded himself, even when Tango tilted Jimmy's head up to meet his eyes, and all Jimmy could think about was how easy it had been to pull Tango's entire weight into his arms, and how simple it would be to pull him into his lap, now.

"I'm alive," Tango said, the words barely a breath of air between them, "because you acted when you did."

Jimmy felt his nails cut into the heels of his palms with how hard he clenched his fists to keep from pulling Tango closer to him.

Two years ago, Jimmy might have been willing to risk the misunderstanding, but he had precious few enough friends in this town, and he counted himself lucky to say Tango was one of them.

"I'll be honest," Tango continued, "I don't like having a gun pointed at me. I know, I know, crazy concept, what with how often it seems to happen. But I knew I was going to make it through, because—" Tango took a breath, "because you were counting on me. And I knew I needed to come back to you."

Tango rolled from one foot to the other, as if suddenly realizing how close they were, as if suddenly noticing that he had Jimmy held, breathless, in his hands.

"Tango..." Jimmy couldn't think of a way to finish that sentence that didn't absolutely condemn him, that didn't condemn them *both* to having to live with his actions.

"You—you had my back, Jim," Tango continued, his voice still quiet, reverent of the silence that surrounded them. "And even if—" Tango swallowed, his hand tightening briefly in the fabric of Jimmy's shirt. He smoothed it back out as he fought for the words he was trying to say. "Even if he'd shot me, I'd've died doing the right thing, this time."

"This time?" Jimmy asked, a slice of confusion cutting through the heady dizziness of having Tango so close, so focused on *him*. His head was swimming, too full to take in the rest of the

words. His brain wanted to reject them, write them off as nonsense, but those two words he found himself latching onto.

Jimmy watched as Tango took a moment to think. He pulled his hands back and shoved them under his armpits. Jimmy wished he wouldn't. He loved the way that Tango's hands never stopped moving, even when he was silent. It was only when he was upset, or trying to play off how he was feeling, that his hands stopped moving, and went into his pockets, or folded across his chest.

"I've got something to tell you," Tango croaked. His eyes fluttered closed as he took a deep breath. If Jimmy didn't know him as well as he did, he'd have sworn that Tango was praying. "Yeah," he said, at last. "I've got something to tell you."

Chapter End Notes

I am still so mortified that I completely missed half of chapter 7 OTL. Anyway, moving on!

Hope you all enjoyed! That scene with Daisy and the "gentleman" is based on a real life actual thing that happened! History is so weird. I can't currently find the book with my notes on it, but as soon as I do, I'll edit this footnote with more info! (That will be a not-at-11-PM thing lol)

As always a great big thank you to my artists [Hybbart](#) and [Foxyola](#)! We're nearly there!! I can't wait to share their art with you all!! :D

You can always come say hi to me [on tumblr!](#)

I'll be replying to all comments from last week first thing tomorrow, because it has been a long day, and now I'm going to go relax and destress from both spending the day in Urgent Care (hooray maladies that, turns out, were not as connected to covid as I thought!) and then discovering that I'd accidentally cut the entire final scene out of chapter six ^.^;

Thank you all for reading!! <3

Right Hand Man

Chapter Summary

Scar finds the limits of his own patience.

Chapter Notes

Hey anyone mind if I turn this on?



In other news, please remember to heed the tags: the body horror starts to come into play here!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“So, what’s the verdict, Doc?” Scar asked on his fourth day in Lonesome Hill. The doctor, whose name Scar had not managed to pin down, but who Hypno only referred to as “Doc,” turned to him with an eyebrow raised. Scar had been dubious at first, wondering how he could possibly handle all the delicate work that a sawbones would need to do as he eyed the man’s large stature and eyepatch, but Doc’s hands were gentle as a spring breeze, nimble and delicate. If Scar was honest, only part of him cared about the answer to his question, the rest of him was crafting up a speech to try and get Doc to come back to Del Sombra with him and work alongside Cub. They might not have had real need of two different doctors, but this way Scar would at least know that his friend was getting *some* rest now and again.

“The verdict,” Doc said, amusement and exasperation shining through his heavy accent, “is that you need to *rest*.”

Scar felt a mask of a smile fall into place on his face, but he felt it might be slightly undermined by the way his teeth ground together. That morning, the ever-present ache in his legs had seemed to burn, and it had been all he could do to stumble into Doc’s office before he collapsed.

“With an old injury like this, you have to take care of yourself,” Doc continued, oblivious to Scar’s annoyance. He didn’t have *time* to rest. He had until the cards told him his next destination, or until the town blew up beneath his feet, whichever came first. “It sounds like you have been traveling for a long time, yes?” Doc continued, much to Scar’s chagrin. He waited for Scar to acknowledge his question with a nod and added, “take a few extra days to rest, or your body will decide when you need to rest *for* you.”

Scar sighed, a small, angry thing that he huffed out through his nose. “I used to do nothing but travel,” he grumbled, “why is this so different?”

Doc leveled him with a look at his tone. Scar was well aware that sounding this level of petulant was beneath him, but he couldn’t really find it in himself to care.

“Traveling on a wagon is different from traveling on horseback for several weeks.” Doc said, his voice light, uncaring.

Scar froze. He didn’t leave his relaxed pose, nor did the mask of a smile slip from his face, but his eyes cut sideways, to where the good doctor was moving his bad leg, sending twinges of pain along Scar’s bones as he forced the knee to flex a few times. Doc seemed entirely unconcerned.

“Who said anything about a wagon?” Scar said, wracking his memory for this man. Doc snorted, and the amusement in his voice seemed to thicken.

“You may look scruffy, but you are still the same man you were three years ago. I never caught your name then, but I did have to clean up your mess. I mean, a smallpox cure, *really?*”

Scar swallowed roughly. He’d forgotten he’d tried the pox cure scam on for size in Lonesome Hill, before he’d taken it for its real ride in Del Sombra.

“Did anyone catch it?” he asked, instead of going for the denial he ought to have, a pit gnawing through his stomach, nice and handy for him to drop all his hopes and dreams down.

“No.” Doc said, patting his leg as he moved it back to rest on the cot before circling to Scar’s other side. “Else you would be in a cell, not in my office.”

“I’m—” Scar began but stopped himself. *I’m sorry*, came to mind as the obvious conclusion to that sentence, as did *I’m different now, I’ve changed*, but... was he? Had he? “A lot’s changed since then,” he said at last. Doc seemed to mull this over as he put Scar’s other leg through the same exercises.

“As long as you’re not here to sell anyone any phony cures this time, your secret’s safe with me.”

“I’m not,” Scar said quickly, “I’m on the other side of the law now,” he admitted, and then paused, shocked at himself. What had happened to the man with a thousand excuses? With a tongue silver enough to charm the devil? Here he was, practically tripping over himself to reassure a man who had *barely* recognized him.

“Glad to hear it.” Doc said, clapping a hand to his shoulder with a bright smile. Scar couldn’t help but find it vaguely threatening. He decided that he’d changed his mind about wanting this man in Del Sombra. Mayor Xisuma Hollows and Lonesome Hill could keep him.

“You’re looking about as right as can be expected,” he continued, his doctor had firmly back in place, “but you’ll need at least a few days of resting, *not* traveling, in order to let your leg rest and recover from the strain.”

“Well, thank you, Doc,” he said, “I’ll see what I can do.”

“What you can do is take my advice, or risk making things worse for yourself,” Doc said, matter-of-fact. Scar tried to find room to argue in his tone and fell flat. He smiled, thin and irritated, instead.

“Will do,” he conceded. If nothing else, he would stay put until the cards gave him a different outcome than they had been. He could be patient *and* rest at the same time.

Or, at the very least, he could *try*. He’d never been a very obedient patient.

Mr. Ratcliffe paced the length of the sickroom, ignoring the looks that Cub kept shooting him. He was clearly caught in his own thoughts, torn somewhere between worry and rage, if the way he was looking at Scar was any indication. Scar, for his part, held his hands on top of his head, so that Cub could finish taping his ribs.

“—And absolutely no strenuous activity for the next week, at least,” Cub said, finishing the spiel he’d been spinning. Scar paid him less than no mind in favor of watching Del Sombra’s latest acquisition pace the room. He’d decided a few things about Mr. Ratcliffe: that he was good looking enough to know it and use it to his own advantage, that he was running from something, and that, for some god-forsaken reason, he’d decided to keep running on his own, if the bag he’d been carrying when he tripped over Scar and broke two of his ribs was any indication.

“Does walking count as strenuous?” he asked, just to watch the way that Cub’s face twitched. For anyone else, he knew that Cub’s answer would have been ‘no,’ but given his previous injury and the pain it often caused him, Cub was careful not to give such flippant answers. More careful than Scar deserved, really. He sighed. “I’ll be good, Cub, cross my heart.”

Cub snorted, “If you have one,” he muttered, low enough that Scar could hear it, but their new friend couldn’t. Scar shot Cub a conspiratorial wink. Another man may have taken offence, but Scar didn’t. There was none to take, he had crafted his reputation very carefully. He could not be swayed by pretty faces, nor tragic stories, nor even the concept of Heaven itself. He followed one creed, and that was to do what was right and best for his people. He grinned as he shrugged his shirt back over his shoulders and stood gingerly.

“Right then!” he exclaimed, cheer practically dripping from the words, “let’s get you back to the bunkhouse, eh? I’m sure your siblings must be worried sick.”

Mr. Ratcliffe flinched a little, and Scar took the opportunity to scoop up his bag, ignoring the way that his ribs protested. Behind him, Cub made an exasperated noise.

He shouldn’t have cared, should have let this man get back on the train and race out of Del Sombra, toward whatever awaited him, but instead, he held the door open, and waited until Ratcliffe walked through it, head bowed like a man approaching the gallows.

He decided one more thing: it was curiosity, plain and simple, that kept him from letting Mr. Ratcliffe continue on his merry way. He couldn’t let it be anything else.

If he were honest with himself, Scar would have to admit that he didn’t *totally* know how his cards worked. He knew that he’d won them in a game of a different sort, what felt like eons ago, and the moment he’d let the well-worn cardboard sift through his fingers he’d known that they were made of more than just *cards*.

He’d taken the time, a few days after getting them, to lock himself in the room he was renting (completely aboveboard! He’d paid every cent, if only because he didn’t want to be interrupted. And if he’d haggled the price down, well, it was only because they’d been overcharging their tenants) and repaint the cards in the way that they’d asked him to, the way that they’d haunted his dreams. The cards reflected him, now, rather than the man he’d gotten them from.

He sat, now, nearly a week after first arriving in town, at the bar of Lonesome Hill's Secondary Saloon, so named because it hadn't been the first to pop up, but it *had* been the one to stick around, even as the town grew into something more approximating the cities that Scar was familiar with. Secondary had moved into the shell of the former *original* saloon, acting almost like a hermit crab as it grew in popularity. The owner, a man called Hypno, had grown used to seeing Scar show up, grab a seat in the corner of the bar, and grumble at the game of "solitaire" he was playing.

Today was no different. He shuffled the deck, drew a card, and set it aside as he put together his "game." He knew that Hypno wouldn't call him on whether or not he was actually playing, nor on the cards he was using. The man knew how to keep his business where it belonged.

When he moved to examine the card that he had pulled from the deck, he found, to his complete lack of surprise, that he was again holding Temperance. He sighed and waved Hypno over, sliding his cards back in an approximation of an organized deck, and ordered himself a drink.

It's Del Sombra all over again, he thought to himself, face twisting at the comparison. If he drew Temperance for the next hundred days, he was going to walk to the nearest creek and scatter the cards in the water. Let the current wash away the pain and responsibility.

He thanked Hypno as he slid the drink down in front of Scar. He fantasized about it for a moment, letting nature take away the responsibility, riding back to Del Sombra and declaring that while he hadn't succeeded in his mission, he *had* decided that the best way to protect Del Sombra was to stay there. Then, he let the imaginary creek wash away the daydream, too.

Cards or no cards, the responsibility would be there.

He sighed and sipped at his drink, trying to decide how to fill his day. His feet already knew the layout of the city, he had spoken to several shopkeepers, asked dozens of questions. He'd seen the ghosts of his former self in every panel of wood in the walls, in every stone that cobbled the roads. It drove him mad, knowing that he *should* be doing something, that he *wanted* to be doing something, but that he was saddled with Temperance, of all things.

He shuffled his deck, his mind far from clear enough for a proper question. He tried to sort his thoughts, into a *where* or *who* or *why*. Any question at all would do. *Where do I need to be* was his go-to, but *who needs me most*, was also a good one. *Where should I avoid*, was one he hadn't used in years.

The question his cluttered mind asked, near as he could tell by the time his frustrated fingers flicked the card down onto the bartop, was *what's the point of patience?*

The moment the card hit the counter, he knew that something was different from his usual readings. He knew the feel of every card in his deck, and the sound that it made when pulled from his deck or the wood of a table.

This card was unfamiliar.

He set his deck aside and reached for the card, half sure he was going to find something he hadn't put there. He nearly slid off his stool when he realized that, instead of some grotesque trick played on him by Nick, the answer was far more mundane: he'd drawn two cards, stuck together, instead of one.

True enough, that was strange in itself, as it had never happened before. But compared to the fear that had spiked through him at first, the worry that tingled at the back of his neck at such a new phenomenon was paltry.

He peeled the cards apart and set them side by side.

He frowned.

Staring up at him were the Three of Wands, the usual sticks and twigs replaced by chillingly familiar rods of bone; and the Page of Wands.

The Page wasn't something he particularly remembered painting. In fact, after the first few, Scar didn't remember painting any of them. He'd emerged from his room and stumbled to the saloon for a meal at sunset on the third day of being holed away, ravenous and, he was sure, looking like a man half-mad. He'd claimed to be an artist, and that had most people rolling their eyes and looking away. Everyone excused the madness of the 'Muse'.

But Scar couldn't excuse *this*. Staring back at him was the Page, the 'wand' in the card's name hooked over one shoulder as brown eyes bored into Scar's own. Blond hair fell into his eyes, nearly saving Scar from the intensity of his gaze.

Scar was *sure* he'd painted him smiling.

Behind the page was a dock and the sea, stretching out to the horizon, where it met half of a setting sun.

He glanced up, suddenly paranoid that someone would see him looking at his cards, but no one was paying him any mind. Hypno caught his eye and nodded at his bottle, asking if Scar needed a top up, but Scar was quick to shake his head and flash a winsome smile. Hypno shrugged and turned back to the customer he was talking to.

Scar put the card down, laying shaking fingers on either side of his reading.

The Three of Wands: old seeds planted, ready to reap. The stars are coming right.

The Page of Wands: action not yet taken, infinite potential.

Scar shuffled the cards back into his deck.

Who needs me most? he asked, desperate. He was sure that he knew the answer, suddenly. Sure as a gun that something was happening that was far, far beyond his understanding.

The Page of Wands landed in front of him.

He raised his fingers in half of a wave, catching Hypno's eye.

“Settle up my tab, would you?” he said, shocked beyond belief that he kept his voice from shaking. Hypno gave him a strange look but shrugged.

“If you’re sure,” he said, turning to his ledger at the back of the bar.

I have a feeling something bad is going to happen, Grian had told him.

And like a fool, Scar had left anyway.

He could feel his leg bouncing on the footrest of his stool, but he couldn’t quite make himself stop.

He was so lost in thought, his mind reeling over routes and whether he should use Jumbles or hire a stagecoach, that he didn’t notice the door opening behind him until Hypno looked up.

“Be right with you,” he said, placidly. “Have a seat.”

“Much obliged,” said the newcomer, sliding into the bar beside Scar.

Scar glanced at him, askance, still half focused on where he could see Hypno adding up numbers from the duration of his stay.

The newcomer looked almost as road weary as Scar had when he’d rolled into town. His blond hair had grown out to his chin, and he had a red bandana tied around his forehead, presumably to keep it out of his eyes. His scruff was at risk of becoming a beard, and the dust on his boots practically stained the leather. His spurs spun as he pulled himself onto the barstool, one hand resting on the bartop for balance.

Scar felt himself freeze, inch by inch.

His hand was made of wood.

Scar swallowed hard. He couldn’t get a good head-on look at the man at this angle, not without drawing undue attention to himself, and he didn’t want to be remembered.

Give the blond fellow one between the eyes for me.

His mad dash back home fell apart in his mind as he drew in a deep, silent breath. Slowly, a new plan began to form. He kept his breathing even as Hypno passed him his tab and Scar rifled in his pockets for the money to pay.

“Ah, howdy, barkeep,” the man beside him said as Hypno turned to him. His voice, Scar noticed, a very purposely affected drawl. A hint of an accent was peeking through the cracks in it. It poked at Scar’s memory as the man ordered his meal. Katherine hadn’t given Scar a name, no one knew much of Ren’s right-hand man, beyond the fact that he was quick on the draw and devoted to a fault.

Scar glanced at the mirrored wall behind the bar. Aside from the man at his side, no one else had come in. There was no sign of the remnants of Bettermost, or of the Red Hand Gang.

Then again, they were all recognizable enough that Scar was fairly certain the screaming would have long since started if they *were* here.

Scar flipped over the Page of Wands and slid it back inside of the deck, getting ready to pretend to leave and go find a good vantage point to watch for this man from.

“Are those tarot cards?” the man beside him asked, shattering his train of thought.

For a moment, Scar felt his heart freeze in his chest. Not because, despite his desire to be overlooked, he was being spoken to directly. Not because he was afraid this man was going to shoot him over nothing.

No, Scar’s heart froze in his chest, because for a moment, the fake accent dropped.

For a moment, he was back in his house in Del Sombra, being asked the selfsame question by Grian, in the exact same tone of voice. With nearly the exact same accent curling around the words.

“Very astute of you!” Scar heard himself saying, pulling on an old persona with an instinctual ease that surprised even him. The salesman’s voice found him smoothly, covering him in a shroud of confidence that his currently shaken core didn’t feel. “Care for a reading?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” the wolf in sheep’s clothing beside him demurred, as if suddenly *shy*. Scar felt as though his entire world was tipped on its head. The man craned his neck, looking at the card in Scar’s hand. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen cards like these before, though.”

“Oh, you wouldn’t have,” Scar said, puffing up as though he were proud. This line was as familiar to him as the clothes he wore. “I painted these myself. You get a better sense of the energy of the cards that way.” This was *partly* true, but the man didn’t seem to cotton on to the lie, and Scar wasn’t about to tell him where it was. He shuffled the deck in his hands with a little more flair than he usually did, watching as the man’s eyes followed his fingers.

Scar pushed back the remnants of his drink as Hypno scooped up his cash and set the deck on the bar between them. “Free of charge,” he said, taking a risk. His heart felt like it was pounding. He winked at the man across from him conspiratorially. “I have to keep my skills sharp; you know.”

To his surprise, the man across from him laughed. The sound didn’t curdle his blood, or strike fear into his heart, no. Instead, he found that the laugh was friendly, *normal*. Either this man was as good an actor as Scar was, or Scar had severely misjudged the sound of evil. The man tapped the side of his nose.

“First one’s free, eh? Well, alright then,” he held out a hand to Scar, who took it without a hint of trepidation. Scar felt as though they should make medals for con-men-turned-sheriffs who had to play it cool in front of one of the very men they were chasing. “My name’s Martyn. I assume you need that for the reading.”

“It certainly helps,” Scar agreed, picking up the deck again for a final shuffle, and fanning it out for Martyn. “Let’s do a basic three-card reading to start,” Scar said, ensuring that he gave

no outward sign that his heart was caught in his throat. “Go on, go on, pick the cards yourself,” he encouraged, when Martyn hesitated, “I’ve found that it keeps the intention clear, makes it easier to read them.”

Martyn made a small, considering noise, as if he hadn’t expected Scar to *actually* say something that made sense. Scar was sure he was used to bunko artists and ballyhoo-spouters, and, while Scar was *both*, technically, this was the one arena he found it impossible to lie in.

Martyn placed his three cards side by side on the countertop, careful to move them closer to Scar as his order arrived. He nodded absently at Hypno, who looked between them curiously, then visibly decided to mind his business.

Scar put his deck aside and reached for the card closest to Martyn, half expecting a knife to come up and strike him at any moment.

“Your past,” he began, taking care to fall somewhere between his normal voice and his ‘card reader’ voice, given he wasn’t being expected to put on a proper show. He flipped over the card.

He stopped breathing. He hoped that the choked noise of his breath catching in his throat had not been audible to Martyn’s ears. When he looked over at his new companion, though, there was no sign of anything strange, just the curiosity of a man having his fortune told. Scar swallowed and forced himself to look.

“The Magician,” he said, his voice betraying nothing of the turmoil he was experiencing. *Grian*, his heart seemed to scream, the name caught in the way it raced. “Reversed. In your past, you felt unfulfilled. Your talents went unnoticed and unused. I get the sense that something didn’t go to plan,” he paused, and Martyn hummed, a little frown on his face. “A venture, perhaps embarked on with an old friend,” Scar added, cursing himself even as he did so. Martyn’s eyes shot from the card to his face, where they stuck, evaluating Scar.

“Lucky guess,” Martyn said, his voice a warning: *move on*.

“No guessing here,” Scar said, pulling back on the guise of a man who did this for a living. “Only one-hundred percent bona fide magic.”

“Mhm,” Martyn said, the noise muffled by the tight press of his lips. Scar moved the card from one side of the reading to lay in front of him. It wasn’t, strictly speaking, how he was meant to do this, but he couldn’t help himself. He moved his arm again, shielding the card from Martyn’s sight. There was no way that Martyn would be able to sense anything of Grian on it, would never be able to tell that Scar even *knew* Grian. Hell, Scar could have been reading into this entirely. Perhaps Martyn didn’t know Grian at all!

A trickle of sweat ran between Scar’s shoulder blades.

Unfortunately, Scar didn’t believe that for a second. This was simply something too large to be contained by mere coincidence.

He flipped over the next card as he spoke again, “Your present.”

The image of a boulder, split down the middle, looking for all the world like the bowls of a scale. From one side, a copse of trees rose, and from the other, a flock of butterflies raced each other into the sky. When he’d seen this one, Grian had guessed it was Justice.

“The wheel of fortune,” Scar continued. Martyn seemed to brighten at the words, his face clearing, back to the man who might as well have just been an ordinary traveler. Martyn, Scar realized, must be just as aware of the meanings of the cards as Scar was, even if he didn’t know the deeper symbolism that Scar had noticed the cards took on.

He couldn’t know that The Magician was Grian’s card, but Scar had a feeling that he was associating it with Grian all the same.

I thought he’d finished Pearl off and was coming for me, next.

“Here in the present,” Scar said slowly, “Your misadventures in the past have led you to where you are. You’ve reached a turning point and are looking forward. Either way, you are following your destiny.”

Scar didn’t believe in destiny, as such, but he did believe that *Martyn* did, if only by the way that his face seemed to glow, the way that he had leaned forward toward Scar. A lifetime ago, Scar would have taken this obvious sign that he’d properly gooned the man as an opportunity to make a small fortune off of him. Right now, with his palms sweating against the top of the last card, all he wanted was to never see this Martyn character ever again.

He knew what card he’d see before he even turned it over. It was well worn on the edge, some of the paint thinning in places, from where Scar had turned it over nearly four-hundred times before he’d finally accepted that Del Sombra was where he was meant to be.

“Justice,” he said, his voice grave. If Martyn noticed that he had said the name of the card before he’d finished flipping it over, he didn’t say. Scar closed his eyes, quietly mourning that *this* was the context wherein he pulled the card he associated with his home. “In your future, justice *will* be served,” Scar said, fully aware of the double meaning in his own words, even if Martyn wasn’t. If Martyn risked Del Sombra, there wasn’t a man alive who could protect him from Scar. “The seeds that have been sown will be ready to reap, and it is what you do with the result that matters.”

I can’t do a damned thing against the will of men, Nick had told him, coolly as Scar and his lucky pen added a caveat to the contract, *as I’m sure you’ve found. But neither plague nor famine nor natural disaster will lay waste to your little kingdom.*

“Well now,” Martyn said, propping his chin on his fist, “that’s *something*.”

Scar didn’t like the way he’d said that. It struck a bell at the base of his skull that left the rest of his body on edge. Scar scooped the cards back into his hand and tried to look casual about the way that he packed the cards away. Hypno eyed him from down the bar, but Scar ignored him. The look was clearly a question, *what’s wrong? Can I help? Or perhaps even who is this clown?*

Scar didn't let any answers show on his face.

"It sure is!" he said, jovial to the last, "Now, ordinarily I'd be more than happy to—"

"I've got a friend," Martyn said, eyeing the little drawstring bag. When he pulled his eyes back up to Scar's face, he felt as though he'd been cut open, left on display. "who could do with a reading."

"We-ell," Scar hedged, watching his plan unravel around him. He *could* work with this, but he would prefer not walking into unfamiliar territory, or worse, an ambush. "I'm afraid only the first reading is free. I'm a rather busy man, and I've got a ticket for the next train out," he felt the lie cut itself on his teeth on the way out, and he hoped that it wasn't obvious enough for Martyn to pick up on it. When did he get so bad at lying under pressure, he wondered. He hadn't finished the thought before the image came to mind of slim fingers drumming on the bar, waiting for Scar to cave, waiting for their game of chicken to end so Grian could flee the town uninhibited.

Martyn smiled like a knife to the heart, "oh, not to worry. We can certainly pay your fee. *And* reimburse you in case you miss your train."

Unfortunately, Scar didn't doubt that.

Also unfortunately, he couldn't seem to find another excuse. Martyn seemed to have anticipated this, already turning away from Scar, toward Hypno.

"On second thought, go ahead and cancel my order," Martyn told Hypno, who nodded slowly, clearly uncertain.

Scar didn't have it in him to acknowledge his almost-friend's silent question, because he was too busy realizing a horrible, gut-wrenching truth.

He was *woefully* unprepared. He had the knife clipped to his belt, but he didn't have his ammunition pouch. He'd gotten reckless, sloppy, *complacent* as he waited for patience to win out.

"Is it far to walk?" he asked, keeping his voice cheerful, even, like they were two friends.

"My friend lives just outside of town," Martyn said, a laugh in his voice. There was a joke somewhere that Scar wasn't getting, but he was sure he would be soon.

"In that case, I'll need to swing by the room I'm renting before we leave." He patted his leg with a rueful smile, "can't get far without my cane."

"Not a problem," Martyn replied, easy as anything. He followed Scar back to his room, though whether that was because he thought that Scar might try and escape, or because he wanted to keep Scar company with his chatter about his *own* experience dabbling in magic, Scar wasn't sure.

As he listened to what Martyn had to say about the magic he'd experimented with, Scar wasn't sure either option was anything less than terrifying. He wasn't giving details, but the

things he mentioned casually as he skirted around the heart of the topic were damning enough.

As they walked to the bunkhouse, Martyn mentioned research—old books written in blood, locked away in iron cages. His voice went cold as he mentioned a friend rich enough to be bored, who learned to pick locks and pockets for the sake of their search.

The cigarette case in Scar's pocket *burned*.

"Actually," Martyn said, as Scar unlocked the door to his room, frantically wondering if he could manage to swipe a few extra bullets while Martyn was distracted, only to find that Martyn's eyes were locked on him the second he glanced at his face. "I'd have gotten farther in my research, but someone I know—that friend I mentioned—stole something from me. That set me back pretty far." Scar froze as he moved to look under his bed, pretending to look for his cane.

"Now who has you this spooked?"

"I'm not spooked. I—I don't spook, Scar." Grian said, sounding offended. The effect was a bit undermined by the fact that he had a bit of candle wax in his hair from when he'd jumped a mile at the sight of Scar, waiting in the darkness once again. Scar had had the foresight, this time, to not fall asleep in front of the door for errant Grians to trip over. His ribs twinged at the memory.

"Sure, sure,"

"It's—" Grian sighed, a small, frustrated noise, "An old friend of mine. We—got into a bit of trouble. Made some bad decisions. He lost his mind. He nearly—he would have killed us. I didn't—I barely got to Pearl in time. Had to make a, uh," Grian's mouth twitched in a facsimile of a smile, "a pretty big sacrifice, to get her out of there," he turned those fathomless black eyes onto Scar and raised an eyebrow. "Satisfied?"

Around you? Never, Scar wanted to say. Instead, he patted the back of Grian's hand.

"Well, I may be biased, but I think you did the right thing."

He swallowed against the feeling of fear scratching down his throat and stuck his head under the low wooden frame. He hated leaving his back exposed to a threat like this, but he didn't have much choice. "That's a shame and a half," Scar said, palming a few of the bullets at the top of his suitcase before he shoved it aside, as if he'd find that the cane had somehow slid behind it, instead of resting on the wall behind the door.

"It is, isn't it?" Scar heard the sound of footsteps as Martyn entered the room behind him. He pulled his head out from beneath the bed, feeling every knob on his spine tingle with the knowledge of how vulnerable he was to attack. He pretended to huff, frustrated, and look around the room. His knee twinged as he pulled himself to his feet, and he didn't have to fake the way he favored one leg over the other when he walked to the little wardrobe to peek inside. Martyn was looking out the window, seemingly patient. Scar went to peek behind the door, mumbling for show about how he'd lose his own head if it weren't attached.

“Aha!” he cried, triumphantly, as if he hadn’t known it was there the whole time. He patted his hat onto his head and grinned at Martyn. “Shall we?” he asked, skin crawling. He wanted this man *out* of the place he’d been using as refuge. He could only imagine how he’d feel if he saw Martyn in Del Sombra.

“Back soon!” he called to Jevin as they made their way out the door. Jevin glanced at him sharply.

Scar made it a point to wave to several other people he recognized, pausing to ask after one thing or another, despite the way that Martyn’s lips thinned when he did. Best to play up the oblivious magician gamut.

Best to be seen by as many people as he could muster, so that either his absence would be noticed, or, better still, Martyn’s face would be remembered.

Soon enough, too soon for Scar’s poor nerves, he ran out of people to notice him. They had crossed outside the bounds of the town and were walking along what could almost pass as a path, were it not for the tufts of grass that cropped up between the wagon ruts. He was doubly grateful for his cane, now, even if it had been a ploy to grab a few extra bullets. He had one in the barrel, and three in his pocket. Not enough, not by a *mile*, but maybe it could get him to safety.

They walked, far beyond the town limits, far beyond the point where Jevin must be getting suspicious. The sun was high in the sky, beating down upon them, when Scar spotted the shack in the distance. It rose like a mirage out of the ground, overgrown with grasses and sagebrush where a garden should have been. A squat tree budged up against the building, nearly knocking in a window where it pressed against the structure.

Upon closer examination, though, Scar realized that the decrepit façade was just that. The stairs didn’t creak as they walked up, and the hinges on the door allowed it to pull open easily.

Then, he was pushed inside, Martyn at his heels, praying that his eyes would adjust quickly enough that he could duck if someone tried to shoot him.

The house wasn’t much, inside. There was a room toward the back, the door slightly ajar, Scar noticed, but that appeared to be the only private space in the rest of the cramped quarters.

And cramped they were.

The house had been built, initially, Scar would have wagered, for a family of three. Maybe four, if they didn’t mind a tight squeeze.

Five grown men were crammed into the space, three sitting at a table, and one on the old cot in the corner.

Scar, to his horror, recognized nearly all of them.

At the table, three of the men were playing cards. The first, who Scar knew from Tango's stories and the poster hidden in his left breast pocket to be called Bdubs, didn't even bother looking up from his hand.

Beside him lounged another man, with white hair and a bandana already covering the lower half of his face, like he was prepared for this to turn ugly at any moment. Etho, Tango had called him. His mismatched eyes burned into Scar. *Kin*, Tango had called him, and staring into the burning red of his left eye, Scar understood. This man was as close as kin to Scar as he was to Tango. Perhaps more so, considering Tango balked at even the prospect of deals, and Scar could feel the strings wrapped around Etho, ready to be pulled at a moment's notice. If he focused, he knew he'd be able to see them, wrapped around his wrists and ankles, ready to make him dance.

Despite his lackadaisical posture, Scar knew that he would be a formidable opponent. His eyes traveled from Scar's face to the cane in his hand, and then snapped back up. Something chilling, something almost like recognition flashed across the half of his face that Scar could see.

To anyone else, that might not have been possible, given Scar had transformed the cane into something unassuming—no use being robbed because he had something fancy-looking to help him walk around—but Etho clearly knew what it was at a glance, or at least could see what it was *meant* to be. And who it was meant to be *with*.

The third man at the table craned his head to look at Scar. He, Scar noticed, didn't have the same hard aura that the others did. His dark skin was untouched by the stress the others carried on their shoulders, and the smile he shot Scar looked genuine. He was the one that Scar didn't recognize. He was fairly certain that he didn't have a bounty out for him.

"Oh!" he said, as if this were an everyday occurrence, "hello!"

"Well, hello yourself!" Scar replied, matching his tone, even as the other presence in the room seemed to notice them.

Scar hadn't looked at him, hadn't wanted to make it seem like he recognized the man. He could feel eyes on him, now, making the hair on his arms stand on end.

Beside Scar, Martyn relaxed. The first genuine smile that Scar had seen on his face appeared like the sun shining through the clouds. The *snap* of the barrel of a gun closing brought Scar's attention to the man that Martyn was looking at, exactly, Scar was sure, as Ren wanted.

"Ren! Look who I've found!" Scar felt a chill run down his spine at the way that Martyn addressed the outlaw across the room. So casual, so assured.

Devoted, Tango had said, *to his bones*.

Batshit fucking *crazy*, Joey had spat, when Scar asked him on his way out of La Belle.

Both seemed to be in full force, right now.

But what brought Scar's mind to a grinding halt was what both had omitted, and that was the way that Ren looked *back* at Martyn.

The weight of Ren's eyes on him had felt like condemnation, like the sword of Damocles come to cut the life from his body. The moment that Ren looked at *Martyn*, the air in the room changed. It lightened, and the small smile that Scar saw grace Ren's face felt... private. After a moment of silent conversation, Ren turned back to Scar, his face far more welcoming than it had been.

"Good day, sir, we do so love new faces around here," he said. Scar didn't believe a word of it.

"B," Martyn said, turning his attention to the table at last, "guard the door, would you? Our new friend here has one hell of a card trick."

"Which B?" piped up the man Scar recognized as Bdubs. Martyn's eyes slid to Bdubs, and there, in the slice of his gaze, was the man Scar had been looking for. The one who would try to kill someone for *wasting his time*.

"The one I *trust*, obviously," Martyn sneered. Bdubs was on his feet between blinks.

"Now see here—!"

"That's my cue," the unfamiliar man—B—stood, putting his hand flat on the table, showing off a pair of aces. Etho groaned good-naturedly and tossed down his own hand. Scar couldn't see what it was from this distance.

Bdubs turned his attention to Scar as the other 'B' slipped past them.

"A card trick, huh?" Bdubs asked, narrowing his eyes at Scar, looking for any signs of untrustworthiness. Etho swept the cards already on the table into his hand. They were gone in the blink of an eye.

"I think he can help us," Martyn said, "he's got a touch of real magic about him, I can see it," he glanced at Scar again, appraising. His eyes didn't linger. Scar's hands went clammy at the words. Privately, he wondered what else Martyn could see.

"I just don't know what kind it is."

"I do," said a quiet voice from the corner. The words hung in the air between them, smooth and even and damning as anything as they all turned to look at Etho. Etho, who hadn't stopped staring at Scar, even as he tried not to look back. "He's mentioned you."

If it was possible for the quiet room to get *quieter*, Scar thought that it did. There was a roaring in Scar's ears that he distantly recognized as his nerves, preparing him to run. His hand tightened on the cane and relaxed, a mute reassurance that it was there, that he'd come out on top of this sort of thing before.

Beside Etho, Bdubs leveled Scar with a glare that could melt steel.

“Last time we met someone else like you, it didn’t end so well for us.”

“You’ve never met anyone like me.” Scar said, automatically, the prideful words snapping free of his self-control. Etho chuckled.

“I believe that,” he said, a hand on Bdubs’s arm. He tilted his head, and Scar could see that he was looking for the magic that swirled around Scar, looking for the Deals. His red eye seemed to glow. “What’s interesting is that you don’t *look* like you’ve made a Deal. *And* I don’t have your contract.”

“Well of course not!” Scar said, offense in every word. It wasn’t often that his sensibility was called into question, and he found himself continuing before he could really think about what he was saying. He let the comment about looks slide on past him. He didn’t want to *say* to the madman with a visible mark of the Devil’s hand that he would rather be shot where he stood than make a contract that he’d have to bear the mark of day in and day out. “What sort of self-respecting businessman lets someone else keep his contracts? I have all of mine, and *he* makes copies of them once they’re signed.” The right breast pocket on his duster seemed to burn against his chest. He ignored the sensation.

Etho’s eyebrows were in his hairline. Scar closed his eyes, briefly allowing himself a moment to mentally kick himself. He just hoped that he hadn’t given away too much to the one man who could probably get Nick to worry about it. He didn’t need to bother with the nerves, he found.

“Never heard of someone thinking about Deals like a business, before. Mostly, folk’ll make them when they’re desperate.”

“More fool, them.” Scar shrugged, “now,” he turned back to Martyn and had to do a double take when he noticed that the man was no longer beside him. He’d moved to stand beside Ren, who was watching the exchange like a particularly amusing game, “how may I be of service?” Scar wanted out of this room, away from these people, and the best way to get that done was to play along until he could get away.

“Go ahead and do a reading for Bdubs,” Martyn said, a wicked smile threatening the corners of his mouth. “Just as proof of concept.”

Scar shrugged, “It’s your money,” he said, trying to salvage what was left of the self-assured, if ditzy, persona he had created. He did his best to ensure that he *sounded* breezy, even as a very non-breezy thought hit him.

What else did Etho know about him? Did he know about Del Sombra? He was saved from the spiral of his thoughts by Bdubs.

“I don’t believe in any of this shecoonery,” he scoffed, kicking his feet up on the table. “Etho, you do it.” Etho’s eyes crinkled and he leaned forward.

“Between you and me,” Etho said, amused, “if I draw the Devil, I’m calling ballyhoo.”

“Slander!” Scar cried, trying a laugh on for size. Luckily, it seemed to fit, he heard a chuckle behind him. He sat in the chair that Other B had vacated then pulled his cards out and shuffled through them.

Scar knew which cards Etho was going to pull before he pulled them. It was clear, from the way his hand hesitated, that Etho did, too. That he could *also* see the magic sparking along the backs of the cards. For a moment, it looked like he was going to deviate, to pull something else out of spite, but then his hand drifted, as if against his will, and pulled the three cards from the deck.

Scar placed them in formation. He hadn’t wanted to do Martyn’s reading. He almost wanted to do this one *less*.

“Past,” he began, all traces of humor gone from his voice, and turned the card over, “the tower.”

Scar fought to keep a laugh from bubbling up his throat.

“What’s that mean?” Etho asked, eying the card, clearly wondering where the “tower” in the tower was.

“You had a conflict in your past—relatively recently, I’d think—and it turned your life upside-down. This led to some serious revelations, some changes in your lifestyle.”

He didn’t give Etho a chance to think about it, but he could tell in the stiff way he held his shoulders that he had already connected the tower with Tango.

Scar pretended he didn’t know that.

“Your present, the two of pentacles—”

“What’s a pentacle?” Bdubs asked under his breath.

“Usually, it’s a coin,” Martyn said, peering over Scar’s shoulder. Ice filled Scar’s veins. He hadn’t even heard Martyn *move*. “He painted these himself,” Martyn continued. Scar flicked his eyes sideways, horrified to notice that Ren was standing beside Martyn, a gentle hand on his back. *Gentle*. Scar cleared his throat.

“The two of pentacles,” Scar continued, stressing the last word and hoping that his voice didn’t betray the sinking realization that he didn’t see a way out of this situation, “you are adapting to your new situation, but you have multiple priorities.” Etho’s eyes darted between Ren, Bdubs, and the card.

Scar looked at Etho, *really* looked, and saw the looping strings of his contract. They were worn, faded by time in a way that Scar had never seen before. One was clearer than the rest, looping around Etho’s wrist and connecting him, not to the same invisible cross bar that would surely activate when the stipulations of his deal were nigh, but to *Bdubs*.

“You’re good at adapting,” Scar said as, despite himself, he felt a pang for Etho, “and that may yet come into play.” He flipped the last card.

Scar raised an eyebrow at Etho.

“The two of swords, reversed.” Good news for Tango, he hoped. “You will have to make a difficult choice, and if you can’t, you’ll be trapped by that indecision. If this conflict involves another person, it will be on them to finish what you’ve started.”

Bdubs snorted.

“Well, that tears it, then. Martyn, you brought us a fraud.”

“Dubs,” Etho said, quieter than ever.

“Like *Etho* would have a hard time making a decision!”

“He’s the real thing, all right,” Martyn said, his voice a warning, razor sharp and begging for Bdubs to argue. His hand landed on Scar’s shoulder, heavy as lead. “He’s going to help us find Grian.”

Fear responses were something Scar had long since trained himself out of. He worked, on a regular basis, with the single most terrifying entity in the known world. If he showed a stray sign of weakness or fear, he knew that he’d be done for.

That did not stop Scar’s mind from reeling when he heard Grian’s name come out of Martyn’s mouth. He’d guessed, and he’d *feared* that this was the man that Grian had once told Scar he’d planned to die fighting for the sake of his siblings. It was an entirely different matter to have the confirmation in the form of Grian’s name in the air of this cramped room full of killers.

“If *Etho* can’t find him--” Bdubs scoffed, “how do you expect this bunko to do it?”

“Etho can’t even find the man who nearly got you both hung.”

“Neither one of them have contracts for me to follow,” Etho cut in, “that’s why I don’t know where they are. I wouldn’t be able to find *him*, either, if he got far enough away,” Etho nodded at Scar. “Our mutual friend might be more inclined to help me find you than Tango, though.”

“Our mutual friend benefits too much from the deals I make,” Scar bluffed. Etho’s eyes crinkled at the corners.

“I’ll give you that. It sounds like he was pleased as punch about the last one.”

Scar felt his face twist into something he didn’t think he’d recognize in a mirror. There it was: Confirmation of what Scar had hoped he didn’t know. He couldn’t lead them to Grian, would never dream of doing it, but Etho *knew*. Whether he knew about the whole sordid affair, or even just the name of the town Scar called home, Scar didn’t know.

Four bullets, he reminded himself. If he could draw fast enough. If he didn’t get shot after the first one. If, if, *if*—

He turned to Martyn, desperate to get out of this by any means. “I don’t have a way to find people. I only do readings on people who are already here.”

Martyn grinned down at him, the twist of his mouth half pitying, half mocking. “Grian’s Pact sticks to him,” he said simply. The way that he said *Pact* sounded the way that Scar and Etho said *Deal*. Scar felt a shiver run down his spine, “and unfortunately for you, it’s left a residue. You reek of Old Magic, and you don’t even know it.”

Scar resisted the urge to sniff his collar.

One bullet, he thought to himself, and then I have to find a place to reload.

“He’ll lead us to Grian,” Martyn continued, ignoring Scar now and speaking straight to Ren, “and once we have eyes on the whole family, I’ll go in alone. I can get Jimmy on side, Grian won’t be able to fight him. Nice and clean.”

This all spanked of a plan that Martyn had run down several times already. Scar closed his eyes and found him face to face with the Page of Wands, unsmiling.

“You sound pretty sure you can get this Jimmy character to follow you,” Bdubs said dubiously. Martyn waved him off, the screws in his fake hand glinting in the sun coming through the window. Though, if Scar wasn’t mistaken, something in his face twitched. A little less sure than he was pretending. He glanced at Ren again, as if watching for something.

“Jimmy’s a pushover, and we were friends. That’s more than I can say for Grian. Blood can only take you so far, and unless Grian has undergone a *radical* personality change, he won’t have bothered trying to foster any trust between them. He leads and expects Jimmy to follow.”

“Which is exactly what you’re doing.” Etho pointed out, voice low enough that Martyn could have pretended not to hear.

“The difference is,” Martyn said, swinging around to glare at Etho, “that I’ve put in the *work*. He’s got good reason to trust me. And I won’t be forcing him to do anything. If he doesn’t follow, I’ll kill him myself.”

Scar took two deep breaths and waved his sense of self preservation goodbye. “You’re forgetting something,” he said, leaning back in his chair, out from beneath Martyn’s hand. He was surprised that his voice came out as strong as it did. Surprised that the dripping dread he’d felt filling his lungs as the conversation progressed didn’t thin out his voice. He scooped the cards off the table and tucked them in his pocket. “Three things, actually.”

“Do tell,” Ren said, dangerously. The sword was back over Scar’s head, shaving away a little of his confidence.

“Jimmy’s a good man. Loyal. He won’t leave Grian behind for just anybody.” Scar said, certain of it. Martyn stared at him, and then started to laugh.

“Oh, stranger,” he said, the ghost of a giggle still on his lips, “I’m *not* just anybody. Not to Jimmy.”

Ren huffed out a frustrated noise, too close to Scar for comfort.

“I don’t like the way you say his name,” Ren said, with the air of a man who’d voiced this same complaint before. Martyn turned to him, the ghost of the laugh still on his face, but he seemed to soften when he looked at Ren.

“I told you, didn’t I? You don’t need to spare him a single thought. I’ll take care of everything else.”

“Also,” Scar said, shattering whatever moment they were having. Martyn glanced back at him, irritated. It would have been a terrifying moment, if it hadn’t been intentional. “Grian won’t take kindly to being betrayed. It won’t matter if it’s Jimmy.”

“Grian won’t be willing to lose another sibling. He’s only got the one left.”

Scar realized, with all the force of a lightning strike, that Martyn thought that Pearl was dead.

What was it that Grian had said?

He would have killed us—

I thought he’d finished Pearl off—

I nearly didn’t save her in time—

Scar felt understanding creeping across his shoulders, weighing him down.

Scar scrambled. Far be it from him, he decided, to disabuse Martyn of that notion.

“I thought—doesn’t he have an older sister?” Scar asked, letting every ounce of confusion spill into his voice. He sat back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest, pretending to think. He kept his gun in a side holster, hidden under his duster. He might be a fool, and complacent, and underprepared, but he wasn’t *stupid*. His hand closed around the hilt.

“If Lizzie survived the night after she ran off without me, I’ll eat my other hand.”

“Joel followed her,” Ren mused. Martyn’s face twisted into something ugly at the mention of Joel, whoever *he* was. All eyes were on Martyn when he spoke again.

“Then she’s *definitely* dead.”

Scar took the distraction. He stood and had his gun out in front of him in one smooth motion. His heart raced, but his hand didn’t shake, and his voice didn’t waver. Every eye in the room snapped to him with all the deadly precision of a team of outlaws. Martyn shifted, covering Ren unthinkingly.

“I won’t help you,” he said, cocking the gun.

They didn't know he only had the one bullet. They didn't know he'd need to duck for cover and reload. Ren's gun still sat on the bed, where he'd left it when Martyn walked in. Martyn was armed, he was sure. Bdubs kept glancing back at the ajar door, like he could jump to it if he needed to.

Etho...

If Etho was smart, he was still armed. He had the feeling that Etho was *definitely* smart. It would only be a matter of time until he decided that Scar only had the one gun, and if they rushed at him together, he wouldn't be able to fend them off. He only had a few moments of self-preservation instinct, if he was lucky.

There was no way he could turn his back to run. He took a tentative step towards the door. Then another. Martyn moved with him, eyes as hard as ice chips.

A whinny broke through the silence, followed by the sound of hooves on the ground.

"He's not alone," Ren snarled. Scar moved so the gun was aiming straight at the leader of the gang, over Martyn's shoulder. If he shot, all hell would break loose.

Whoever that was *wasn't* there for him—

A squawk cut off his train of thought.

"Big B is stealing my horse!" Bdubs shouted, rushing to the window.

Martyn frowned. He clearly wanted to look, clearly wanted to see if what Bdubs was saying was true, but he kept his eyes on Scar.

Bdubs moved to march to the door, as if he planned to chase down Big B. His tirade cut off as Etho caught him, pulling him back, away, out of the line of fire. Scar tried to get his mind to work. This was what he was *good* at, blast it all. Scar opened his mouth, intent on bartering his freedom, but another noise cut him off.

Knock.

Knock.

Knock.

Each knock was a fading echo of the first. Scar didn't turn to look, he didn't dare, but everyone else did.

The door didn't open behind him, but he felt something shift in the air. A swift, cold wind blew in through the gaps in the doorframe, and the temperature dropped. Scar blinked, his vision going dim, and tried to focus his eyes. Across from him, Martyn did the same, and Scar could see enough to note Bdubs scrubbing at his face.

His heart stampeded to life in his chest as he realized that his vision wasn't going dim. The entire *room* was being plunged into an ice-cold darkness.

“What is this?” Ren demanded. Before Scar could answer, either with the honest truth, or something he came up with on the fly, the room went pitch black.

Scar was no stranger to darkness: to the open sky in the middle of nowhere under the weight of a new moon, the shadow of a hiding space as he waited for his pursuers to pass him by, the encroaching dusk of an approaching presence at a crossroads.

This was none of those things.

This was the darkness that lay between a man’s ribs after he’s dead and buried. This was the sort of darkness that drove men mad.

He couldn’t see a damned thing. Fear prickled at the back of his eyes, and his racing heart stumbled.

Scar moved as silently as he dared, shifting away from where he’d stood and using muscle memory to try and load his three other bullets into his gun. He could still hear the others, but he didn’t fool himself into thinking that he was a good enough shot to down them in the dark, let alone in *this* dark. He thought, briefly, about trying to find the door, but he would further blind himself just as much as everyone else if he suddenly threw daylight into this room, and if he was going to run for it, he would need to see where he was going.

“Martyn—” he heard Ren start.

“Here, Ren, I’m here.”

The darkness began to recede from the walls, dripping away from the corners and pooling on the floor. It shifted, foglike, and all Scar could do was watch, rapt, hunched by the wall, sliding the last bullet into the chamber, as it coalesced into a figure—willowy and ethereal and *almost* familiar, as though Scar had seen it in his dreams—between Scar and the rest of the house. The shadow stood as tall as the ceiling, and all Scar could see was its back, from which a single, ink-black wing stretched, shielding Scar further. Tendrils of shadow crept along the floor from the figure’s waist, swaying in a breeze only it could feel.

The shadow’s arms straightened, and the tip of a sword scraped across the floor, gouging a divot half the size of a man into the wood. The sword didn’t gleam, the way most blades did. Instead, it seemed to shimmer and draw all of the light around it inward. Scar could see points of light shifting just beneath the blade.

“Judas Priest,” Bdubs breathed, his voice thick with horror. Etho’s gun *was* out now, as he stood and shoved Bdubs behind himself, closer to the door. A quick and practiced *I’ll get you out first* between the two of them. Scar glanced at the door in question. This could be his chance. He could take this opportunity, while everyone was distracted—

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Martyn said, sounding gleeful, “Ratcliffe, old boy, is that you?”

Scar froze.

“Martyn,” the shadow said, in a hundred voices Scar recognized. In it, he heard Gem and Cleo, Señora Ramos and Shelby, every single one of Alice’s girls, all held together by one voice, that Scar would know in life, in death, in unnatural shade.

“Grian?”

The shadow turned its head, the movement too smooth to be human. His eyes, when they looked at Scar, were *wrong*. They spoke of vultures waiting to be fed, of the waiting that came during a drought, of the desperation of a man in the depths of the desert, who’s lost the road and knows he’s going to die. Even as the rest of him was shrouded in shadows, his eyes shone, crystal clear through the dark.

Grian’s eyes were *blue*.

He turned away from Scar and back to the men on the other side of the room.

“Give up, Martyn,” Grian said, his voice weary. “Go home.”

Martyn laughed once, high and clear. Mad, Scar realized. He was as mad as they all said Ren was.

“C’mon Grian,” he said, half cajoling, half sardonic, “we both know that I won’t. And now I *can’t*.”

“Martyn,” Grian began, a frustrated bite to his words that Scar was familiar with, even underscored by a hundred other voices.

“This is *proof*. We were *right*, Grian.”

“We were no such thing!” Grian snarled. The edges of his body—form, *whatever* it was—flared briefly before settling back into the curling, shifting fade-to-solid that they had been. The tendrils of smoke coiled and uncoiled at his sides like fists. “We thought we were smarter than everyone else, but we *fell for it*. All of this, everything we were researching was *wrong*.” Scar couldn’t stop staring, looking for the man he knew underneath all that shadow. The body in front of him was both strange and familiar. Grian and not.

Martyn looked at the face of Grian’s anger and scoffed.

“Would you have cared half as much about how right or wrong it was if They hadn’t wanted Pearl?” Martyn asked. Scar watched the shadowy fingers tighten on the hilt of the sword minutely. He had a feeling that even though he didn’t understand a word being said, he wasn’t supposed to be hearing any of it.

“We’ll never know.” Grian admitted, after a moment, “We didn’t understand it then, and we *still* don’t. You’re messing with things far beyond your control.”

“You seem to be handling it just fine, and you botched the sacrifice.” Martyn said easily.

“I am not *fine*—” Grian began, the words dripping venom. Scar was so focused on Grian, on his words, on trying to see him in this shadow that towered over a foot taller than it should

have, that when the click of a hammer locking in place sounded, too near him. Thanks only to instinct and practice, Scar jumped to the side.

Pain lanced through him as the bullet tore at him, slicing through his side. It would have been a gut shot, he realized.

Nasty way to go.

Scar didn't see Grian move, but he must have, because the next thing Scar knew, he couldn't see anything at all.

He floundered for a moment, trying to find the light, and gasped at the sudden cold surrounding him. He remembered jumping into creeks at the turn of spring and summer, the water still just the wrong side of frozen. This was worse. This was falling through the ice on a lake you didn't know you were walking on. Numb fingers nearly dropped his gun, but muscle memory kept it from fumbling to the ground.

"Bdubs!" Etho yelled, voice panicked, "no, *no*—"

Scar finally floundered enough to pull away slightly, looking to where Bdubs had been standing, and wished he hadn't.

The sword, in all its unholy glory, glowed where it was stuck through Bdubs's chest. Scar watched, horrified, as the color leached from Bdubs's face. Scar couldn't quite comprehend it as Bdubs's body seemed to bend towards the sword, as if being sucked into it. Then, between one blink and the next, he was gone, as if he'd never been in the room at all.

Above Scar, a mournful sound echoed through the room.

Grian let go of the sword in time to catch the gun Bdubs had been holding, shrouding it in shadow.

The sword hung in the air as Grian handed the gun to Scar, who took it in his other hand with fumbling fingers. Despite the cold Grian radiated, the barrel was still smoking.

"I'm not *fine*," Grian said, and this close, Scar could pick out individual voices, and realized why, even blended as they were, they all felt so familiar. A laugh from his dreams echoed in his mind. "I'm not even fully in *control*. Right now, we just want the same thing."

Grian kept Scar wrapped in the shadows. Ice pressed into his skin at every point of contact. He felt what should be a warm arm wrap around his back, fingertips pressed into his side, and they burned, colder than frostbite. The singular wing curled around his back.

Even now, even like this, Grian was focused on protecting him.

"You don't know what you're talking about, Martyn. You never did." Grian said, even as he looked to Scar, searching for signs of harm.

"Oh, but I do." Martyn said. Too close. Scar shoved back, out of the strange embrace. He pulled back in time to see Martyn's hand close on Grian's sword arm. The flash of a blade

was all the warning they got as Martyn sunk a dagger into Grian's chest. Those too-blue eyes widened in shock and pain as he let go of Scar and stumbled. "And," Martyn continued, poisonous, "I won't be stupid enough to use *myself* as a sacrifice."

A choked noise escaped Grian, echoed with a thousand death-knells that Scar recognized. All citizens of Del Sombra. All the ones he'd been too slow to save. It knocked Scar out of his shock and he moved, shoving himself forward. His fingers were numb, but that only meant that when he aimed the shot at Ren, it didn't kill him outright.

The man went down with a scream of pain, shattering whatever spell Martyn had been under. Scar's ears rang, though if it was from fear or the gunshot in the tiny room, he wasn't sure. He was vaguely aware that he was yelling, nonsense threats that no one else heeded.

Martyn lunged for Ren, helping him to his feet. He had, Scar noticed with distinct horror, pulled the dagger free of Grian's chest when he'd rushed to Ren. The silver blade was dripping shadow, black ichor had stained Martyn's fingers, both flesh and wood.

Scar aimed the guns again, one at Etho, who stood, frozen, staring at where Bdubs had been, and one at Ren and Martyn.

"OUT," he roared, not even caring that he was letting them get away, nor that he could have finished them all off easily, now that he had more than four bullets to work with. His fingers were full of pins and needles, and even with the extra ammunition, Scar didn't know how off his aim would be. Despite all rumors to the contrary, Scar was not a betting man. He only offered a gamble that he thought he could *win*. Deals he knew would benefit him far beyond the consequences they could pose. Martyn dragged Ren out the door, shouting for Etho to follow him. Etho, lost, stumbled after him, survival instinct taking over.

Scar waited until he heard more hooves on the ground, and then dropped the guns.

At some point, Grian had slumped down to his knees, staring uncomprehendingly at the way his shadows shifted. Scar reached for him, kneeling amongst writhing shadows, and trying to staunch the wound.

"You'll be fine, right?" he asked, his voice a shade too high. "G, tell me you're going to be fine."

The wing behind Grian shuddered, setting loose a storm of black feathers. When he spoke, it was the sound of the wind through the canyon cliffs behind Del Sombra.

"He kept the *atharme*," he said, his voice as thin as the whistle of a train, and collapsed into Scar's arms.

But when Scar reached up to hold him, to try and stabilize the man he loved, all he got was a chill, and a handful of feathers, dissolving like smoke between his fingertips.

Grian was gone.

Scar had never done a crossroads ritual quite like this one. He'd always done his level best to present the same calm and collected front, tried to be the smooth talker who could out-con anyone. And it worked, time and time and time again.

But he couldn't hack it this time.

He stumbled from the house on shaky feet, and barely got the cane under him in time to keep his leg from giving out beneath his weight. His side burned from the near miss with the bullet Bdubs had sent his way.

The rest of him burned from where Grian had touched him, ice cold from being enveloped in the shadows that had seemed to make up his body.

Still, he ran.

He ran until the edge of town was nearly in sight. He rushed past the post marking the directions the road went in.

Scar knew he didn't have to do anything but wait, the Devil would meet him here all the same, but urgency hummed in his bones. He bit down on his tongue, hard enough to bleed, and tossed the cane aside. He fell to his knees in the middle of the crossroads and dug with his bare hands. He felt his fingernails crack and break under the pressure, but he wasn't deterred. He pulled a copper penny from his pocket and shoved it in the hole. Then, for good measure, just so the Devil would be sure of who was calling, Scar spat a mouthful of blood onto the dirt.

Before the blood had begun to dry, before Scar could inhale, before he could bring his shaking hands up to cover the hole with dirt, before he could try and force his legs to stand, a shadow fell over him.

"Well color me surprised," said a familiar voice.

"Sure as I stand here, I never would have thought you had enough of a heart to feel this much for a body."

Scar wanted to rage, he wanted to howl and spit and make demands, but in this man's presence, that was nothing new. He looked up at the Devil, and the Devil grinned down at him.

Not just anybody, Scar nearly said, but didn't. It was too much of an echo of what Martyn had said about Jimmy.

"He's protected," he said instead. He hated the way his voice sounded, hoarse, ragged, not the man known for his deals. "He's a resident of Del Sombra. He's protected,"

The Devil sighed and passed a hand through his hair, a gesture meant to be disarming in its humanity. Both he and Scar knew Scar would see right through it.

"He," the Devil muttered, and Scar knew him well enough to parse the tone, the way his voice went thin at the edge of the word, "and his family are outside of my jurisdiction."

Residents of your little Domain or otherwise. I did *try* to warn you about the big ole hole they left in your defenses, but someone keeps forgetting to check the mail.”

“That doesn’t—” Scar began, feeling his fingers begin to tingle as fear filled his veins. He was cut off by a raised finger.

“And in any case,” the Devil continued, “I can only protect Del Sombra from natural disasters, diseases, and the like. I have it on the *Highest* Authority that I can’t change the ways of men.”

The words fell into the air between them, staining the dirt beneath Scar’s knees. Panic blazed within him, and he gripped it by the throat, turning it into something useful: *wrath*.

“Then this call is of no use to me,” Scar snarled, shoving himself back to his feet.

“Until next time, little devil,” Nick called after him. Scar marched onward, stopping only to grab his cane. The sound of laughter at his back pushed his feet forward, even as he wanted to collapse.

“Come on now, I know when you’re gooning me.” Scar chastised, feeling his skin burn under the weight of the gaze upon him. “And I’m no fool.”

“One dies every minute,” Nick shrugged.

“For a piddly contract like this, that’s nothing on your end. The souls of the whole town? That’s a reach and a half! Now, I reckon you could do it for one soul, easy.” Scar argued.

“For the right soul,” the Devil drawled, slow and pleased, “Perhaps.”

Scar felt chilled to the bone.

He owed the people of Del Sombra nothing. He could have shrugged and walked away, leaving them to their certain doom. He should have lived up to his number one rule: only deal for himself, only make deals he knows he can keep. Only gamble when he knew he could win.

He should have walked away from the crossroads empty handed and returned to the townsfolk with a: well sorry about that, nothing I could do, you see. If the cure doesn’t work, it means the disease is too far along, that’s all, and have done with it.

Instead, he swallowed, and pulled out his lucky pen.

“Well, alright then. But for the right soul, I’m afraid there’s going to need to be a few more additions.” He said, already thinking of ways to turn this to his advantage. Already thinking of ways to get out of it. “I’ll write up the original and you can make a copy, hey?”

~

He didn’t want to know what he looked like, to get the looks he did from Mayor Hollows, Jevin, and Hypno when he returned. The trio had been waiting for him at the boarding house,

the Mayor had been squinting down at the pocket watch in his hand, as if they'd all decided on a time to give up on Scar by.

"The Red Hands have a hidey-hole about a mile west of your border," he said, "might be a good idea to clear it out and burn it. I have to go. If they're smart, and I know they are, they'll be headed back to Del Sombra."

Scar choked on the name of his town, his *little Domain*, and hoped it still felt like home when he got there. Mayor Hollows stared at him for a moment, eyes unfathomable, then glanced at the others. They seemed to have a silent conversation. Hypno broke off, clapping Scar on the shoulder as he went. Mayor Hollows turned back to him and nodded, opening the door to the bunkhouse for Scar.

"There's a sleeper set to leave in fifteen minutes, heading west."

"Then that's where I need to be."

"Get your things, I'll have Jevin board your horse."

Realization struck Scar.

"Both Jevin and Hypno saw Ren's right-hand man. Martyn. They'll be able to give you a description," he said, "Can't say as to if you'll need it, but it doesn't hurt to be prepared," he added before pushing through the pain and through the door.

He made quick work of clearing out his room and getting his things. He took a detour to pat Jumbles goodbye (or, as he really rather hoped, goodbye *for now*) and was at the station before Xisuma.

After that, all he had to do was wait. He thought that might be enough to kill him.

He boarded the train and sat back, his cane at his side and his little bag beneath the seat. It was a far cry from his wagon, but a far sight better than a horse, lovely as Jumbles was.

He rested his head against the back of his seat, letting little bits of conversation wash over him, as he tried to avoid the slow, creeping dread that threatened to consume him.

"—I *know* what I'm talking about, Joel—"

"—Can't be serious—"

"Stop *worrying*, my days. This is a civilized railroad. We won't get caught up in any of that nonsense."

Scar's eyes flew open. He leaned to the side and listened a little harder.

"I heard that this line was in opposition with the Littlewood Line," a woman said, her voice low, terrified. "Can't we wait for the next train? It would be just our luck—"

“Nothing’s going to happen, Ruth,” the same man who’d spoken earlier said, his voice placating. “These Railroad Wars are all sensationalism, anyway. Asides, it’s too late now. Look, the porter’s going around and closing all the doors.”

Scar twisted to look. Through the window, he caught Mayor Hollows’s eye again.

To Scar’s chagrin, the man looked troubled. He raised his hand in a wave and plastered on a smile that was clearly rehearsed.

Before he could second guess his choice of transportation, the train hissed into motion and decided Scar’s fate for him.

The next coincidence or bad omen to look his way, Scar decided, could meet the underside of his boot.

Chapter End Notes

So, same time next week? :D

Also, [everyone go look at this incredible art posted by slooopes](#), I am SO emotional, y'all!!

Edit: so after four hours of sleep and my partner being a saint and catching the typos I didn't, I've made a few edits! I also wanted to mention, in case anyone is curious, that 'atharme' is spelled the way it is on purpose! That is how the ritual knife is mentioned in the original Key of Solomon, which is a very prevalent tome with regards to many existing cultural practices, though most of them refer to it as an "athame" nowadays, without the "r."

More relevantly, the Key of Solomon is also referenced in some H.P. Lovecraft works. :)

(Unrelated, but seeing some people reference songs in relation to this fic has me wondering if anyone would be interested in seeing my DitD playlist, lol.)

Big thanks, as always to to the mods of the event, and to my artists [Hybbart](#) and [Foxyola!](#)

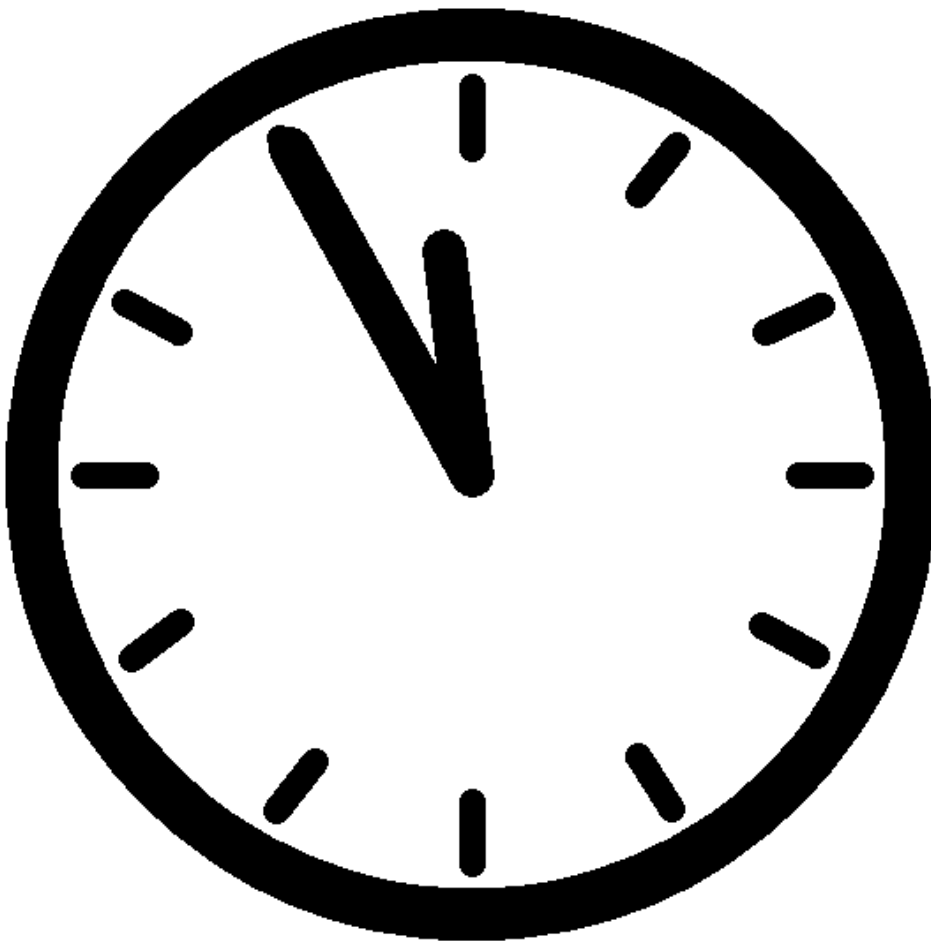
You can come ~~yell at me~~ say hi on [tumblr!](#)

Unconventional Methods

Chapter Summary

In a last-ditch effort to save Jimmy and the whole of Del Sombra, Tango lays all his cards on the table. With a pot this big, he's only got everything to lose.

Chapter Notes



Going back in time a little, Tango and Jimmy get to have their little heart to heart!

[ALSO IF YOU HAVEN'T SEEN THIS, PLEASE FEAST YOUR EYES](#), Leaf did SUCH amazing art of the scene from Chapter One even Mr. Solidarity himself loved it, as it ~~DESERVES~~ I'm still screaming about it tbh.

A couple people (cough, one, it's one person, hi pastelitey) mentioned wanting to see the playlist for this fic! [You can find that here!](#)

Additionally, other things I listened to semi-constantly while needing background music were these videos:

[Soundtrack to an Imaginary Western](#) (Scott Lynn singlehandedly stole my Spotify Top 100 last year)

Western Ambiance [One](#) and [Three](#).

And, of course, I couldn't have done my editing without the greatest Western Music Composer of all time, [Ennio Morricone](#). Think of a song from a western. Any song. There is a 92% chance it was written by Ennio Morricone. Absolute Legend.

Anyway, housekeeping done, hope you all enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tango focused on the familiarity of the floorboards beneath his feet, the soft leather of Skizz's spare boots, long since molded to Tango's feet. He listened for the flap of buzzard's wings, but heard only Jimmy's quiet breathing as he waited for Tango to continue. He could feel his fingernails digging into his sides as he took a moment to look at Jimmy. He was supposed to be out of tears, but he could feel a whole lump of them burning a hole in his throat.

Just one more moment, he told himself, taking in Jimmy's dusty blond hair, his brown eyes, warm in the lamplight, looking up at him with so much trust. Worst of all, Tango saw worry there. Worry for *him*. Jimmy had put so much faith in him today, how could Tango do anything more without returning that trust in spades?

One breath, he thought, tracing the pattern of new freckles on Jimmy's sun-kissed face. The man had such a habit of pulling his hat down off his head and forgetting it. Tango was glad of it.

In—the curve of Jimmy's cheek, down to the line of his jaw, the sweep of his cupid's bow as his lips turned up and his brows turned down in a confused little smile.

—*Out*.

Out of breath. Out of time.

"Yeah," Tango said, wondering if this was how men felt when they were walked to the gallows. The words fell from his lips without his input. Jimmy needed to know. *Tango* needed to know that Jimmy knew. He could still save Jimmy from everything Tango had pulled down on his head. All he had to do was get Jimmy to tell him to go, and there was only one way to do it. And if he didn't—Tango couldn't let himself think about that possibility.

"There's something I have to tell you."

Twenty-Six Years Ago

Tango counted quickly, separating the stacks in front of him into even piles for the sake of his sanity. Behind him, he could hear Impulse pacing. Zed had been exiled to keep watch, so he'd stop making Tango lose count by asking how much they'd got.

Tango set aside the last pile and cast his eye over everything, doing the math once, twice, and again for good measure.

"Is it enough?" Impulse asked, a thread of nerves in his voice, something Tango only caught by virtue of knowing the man from before he learned to cover his nerves with an easy demeanor.

Tango added up the fare from where they were to New York, the price of renting a workshop—they could always live on premises until they got spooled up and running—the price of materials and patents and stopped there.

"Not by half," he said, scrubbing his hands over his face and through his hair. "We need something bigger, Impy, or it's gonna take us an age to scratch up enough to get going."

Impulse swore, something Tango savored, given how infrequently it happened. It was almost like watching a nun blaspheme—horrifying in a delightful sort of way. Impulse leaned out the window and waved to Zedaph, his cue that it was safe to come inside.

The three of them sat around the little rag-bag that held all of the money they'd ever seen—company scrip didn't count, and they were far from the town where it might have—and looked at each other, instead of at the bag. Zedaph drummed his fingers on his knees where they were drawn up under his chin and looked at Impulse. Impulse had bitten his nails down to the quick, a habit that they'd *nearly* broken him of, before this, and looked at Tango. Tango's fingers were knotted behind his neck, and he was staring at the bag, like it might suddenly double in size.

A thought was occurring to him, a plan that was mad enough that it might work.

"What's the next nearest town?" he asked, glancing between the two.

"There's one a little more northward," Zed said, "I forget the name."

"San something," Impulse put in, already reaching behind himself for the map that he'd stolen off the wall in the train station while Tango and Zed distracted the stationmaster.

"Here," Impulse said, pointing to the spot they were on the map. He dragged his finger north, until it hit the dot labeled *San Venganza*.

"Shops ain't gonna have the money we need," Tango said, staring down at the map like it might reveal its secrets to him, "but a bank might."

“There’s a reason you hadn’t heard of the Zitters before me,” Tango said, picking his words carefully. He had one solid memory of his mother, teaching him the difference between the berries that would be good in a pie, versus the ones that would kill you, and make it hurt the whole while. Even so, he remembered more of what the berry bushes looked like than her face. Each word he said felt like one of those berries, nigh indistinguishable until they killed you or didn’t, “And that’s because they died—we died—in a train crash back in ’62.”

Jimmy blinked, and Tango knew his face better than he knew his own—he’d sure spent more time looking at Jimmy than he’d ever spent in front of a mirror—but he didn’t know what to make of his expression now. There was a twitch of his brows that Tango thought might be confusion. The slight downturn on the left corner of his mouth could have been disbelief. His usually expressive eyes were shuttered windows, and Tango couldn’t find a single crack to peek through. Tango swallowed, feeling his heart start to sink, and kept going.

“And when I died,” Tango said, feeling shaky, “probably because I’d just gotten about a hundred people killed,” he closed his eyes against the feeling of dirt beneath his fingernails and the sun beating down on his back. He choked out a sound that may have been a laugh, if you wrung all of the amusement out of it, “I went to Hell.”

And there it was.

It struck him, with a feeling like a sob, but without the accompanying tears, that he’d never said it aloud before. He’d never had to. Skizz hadn’t bothered to ask for details and Etho had known on sight. And now?

Now, it was out there, staring Tango in the face, standing between him and the man that he’d accidentally opened his heart to.

Now, he couldn’t take it back, claim there had been a mix-up, or that he had just dreamed it all.

Now, Jimmy was looking at him, his eyes flicking across Tango’s face, maybe looking for a lie. Tango didn’t know what he was seeing, but he knew a lie wasn’t it.

“Hell,” Jimmy said slowly, drawing out the word with care. Tango still couldn’t read his eyes. “As in…”

“As in the Devil picked me up in the middle of the desert and took me down personally,” Tango said, drily. “And He was not pleased to have had to make the trip.” He swallowed harshly against the memory of fear that rose like bile in his throat and fixed his shaking hands back under his arms, where nobody could see them. He hadn’t prayed in twenty-odd years, hadn’t seen the point, given the circumstances, but he wanted to kneel now, send up some sort of wish that Jimmy would believe him, and not hate him after, to boot.

If wishes were horses, he remembered the Devil saying, all curled smoke in Tango’s ears, beggars would ride.

Twenty-Four Years Ago

Tango didn't know how long he'd been walking. He'd been marched through the desert wastes that he had once called home, up and over mountains, through scrubland, between hills, and had long ago lost track of where he was. He'd boiled beneath the sun and frozen in blizzards, been rained on and buffeted by winds strong enough to call up a twister.

Still, he walked with the Devil at his back.

The sun never seemed to finish setting, always blazing directly in his eyes. The skin on his bare shoulders peeled, his lungs burned, his head ached.

Still, he walked.

That was how he knew that he was dead. No man could survive this. By all rights he should've collapsed miles back. The dust in his eyes should have long since blinded him, and if not the dust, then the sun. The dust coated him, since the twister. Burning his eyes, falling from his hair at every step, mixing with the blood in now-threadbare shoes to create a grating, near-caustic mixture that made every step agony.

And just behind him and to his right, he could hear the careful, even tread of steady feet and a cane against the earth.

Still, they walked, the only noise to greet Tango was the singing of the elements in his ears, or the patient flapping of the buzzards above.

Is this it? Tango wondered, and a hundred miles later, *is this all there's ever going to be?*

Just him and the Devil, walking endlessly? That would be a type of hell, to be sure.

But no more had he thought it than the Devil started speaking.

"Now, normally I delegate this sort of thing," the Devil told him, in that cool, smooth voice of his, the sort of voice that Zed would have said had diamonds for fillings.

He knew better than to ask if he'd see Zed or Impulse on the other side. Even if they had all gone south, there's no way a man like the one whose cane was imprinted along every knob on Tango's spine would ever let him see them again. There'd be too much comfort in it.

"But," the Devil continued, after another thousand steps, as if he'd never stopped speaking. Maybe he hadn't. Maybe Tango was miscounting, "you kicked up just enough of a fuss that I thought it for the best to give you a proper escort."

"What sort of a fuss?" he asked, unthinking. His voice came out a rasp, his throat so dry that he was surprised he could make a sound. His only warning was the missing noise of the cane tip hitting the ground, before a sharp *crack* hit his ears.

A moment later, the pain followed.

Pain, he'd found, had gotten worse since he'd died. He felt every step as though it burned him, every breath pulled at the cuts on his lips and stirred the dust caught in his lungs into a frenzy.

He felt the cane hit him along the shoulders, and the first sensation was the pressure, the way that the solid bone of the cane shaft pulled at the burn on his shoulders, and it was all downhill from there.

He didn't fall unconscious, but he did hit the ground, the rocky gravel beneath them pointed enough to stab, but not sharp enough to slice through skin. It would bruise, though, he was sure. He choked back a cry of pain, and didn't cry, his eyes had long since dried.

The Devil had figured out just where to hit him to make it hurt the most. Some spots on his back had gone numb, which he thought must have been Heaven's last gift to him, because the rest of his back hurt so bad that he thought it might kill him.

It probably would have, if he weren't already dead.

"Stand up," He said, disdain dripping from his tone.

Tango knew better than to refuse, by now.

Getting to his feet was a struggle, but staying down wasn't an option.

"We're nearly there," the Devil told him, dismissively, his cane back under his hands, bloodless and clean.

For another thousand miles, Tango walked.

~

"I know Del Sombra isn't *much*," Jimmy said, the words holding the trappings of a joke, but his tone fell flat. His shoulders were stiff, and the tight smile on his face was better than the blank mask, but not by much, "but she's a far sight better than hell."

"No," Tango choked on the words, grinding the pads of his thumbs against his eyelids to discourage the burning sensation he could feel building. If he cried, would he cry tears? He hadn't had time to try, after Skizz. Who knew, maybe he'd swallowed enough dust in that endless walk that he'd cry sand. He'd bet good money that Jimmy would believe him, if he did, "No, Del Sombra is perfect, Jimmy. I couldn't have dreamed a nicer place if you asked me to."

"Right," Jimmy said, then, "okay. Hell and the Devil are real," he chewed on his lower lip, the way that he did when he was thinking hard. Tango just hoped that he wasn't thinking that Tango had gone mad.

"What," Tango started, his voice holding humor he didn't quite feel, "you ain't a God-fearing man, Jimmy?"

“No,” Jimmy said, his eyes holding onto something by the door over Tango’s shoulder, “not for years.”

~

Twenty-Four Years Ago

The hole in the hill in front of Tango yawned, dark and cavernous, but he didn’t stop walking. He felt the tip of the Devil’s cane poke him forward when he hesitated, breathing in the wet, musty air that wafted up from inside the cave. It smelled different from what he remembered of the mine. They’d only made him go down the once, before assigning him as the trapper instead, because the other miners thought he’d go spare, or they would.

What are you doing, boy? The Foreman had asked, and Tango, lucky fool that he was, had answered:

Looking for my parents.

He’d meant their bodies, not their ghosts, of course, but the Foreman hadn’t seemed to understand that. Superstitious lot, miners. It had rubbed off on Tango, a bit, and on Impulse and Zed even more.

They ‘d started talking about leaving the day after they got their work assignments.

He didn’t wait for the Devil to tell him to keep moving.

The darkness was familiar, at least. The weight of rock over his head, and the way the world hushed around him. He reached out and pressed his fingers to the cave wall to keep himself steady and slid his feet along the ground to keep himself from tripping in the dark. The cave wall pulled at his hands, slicing open his fingers, but it was just another tick of pain in the barrel with all the rest.

He expected to get claustrophobic, for the world to press down on top of him, for the darkness to start to claw at his eyes and the silence at his ears. Instead, his eyes began to sting. He chalked it up to the dust from earlier and kept on, but the stinging led to burning, and to what felt like a dozen cactus spines jabbed into his eye sockets.

Behind him, the Devil chuckled, and the air shifted.

It felt like when he’d open the door for the carts, the change in the air meaning a new passage was open, and the air that buffeted him didn’t stink of coal, but of sulfur and flame.

He reeled back, the combination of fear and pain sending him backwards on instinct.

An arm caught him around the shoulders, deceptively supportive.

“Open your eyes, boy,” the Devil said, sounding eager, “and face your fate.”

Tango knew he shouldn’t be able to see, but in a haze of red that might have been his own blood from where he’d been clawing around his eyes, trying to get the pain to stop, he saw

what the Devil was referring to.

At first, his mind told him that he was in the belly of some great beast, that he was looking at the bones of an animal, picked clean by a predator and swallowed whole. And then he realized that he was looking at row after row of crystal stalactites and stalagmites, some as thick as his torso, some in bunches the size of his palm, all shining with a deceptive beauty. All framing a wicked looking staircase that led down. This was no ladder or mine elevator, safe enough and fit for purpose. This was a thing of beauty, meant to look stable and beautiful, but Tango could see the treachery in the distance between steps and the iron spikes along the handrails.

It was sheer habit that kept him moving, down the stairs and through circles of suffering.

It was only the shock of cold air on his face, reminding him of being fourteen and in charge of making sure that his only friends in the world could breathe beneath the surface of the earth, that knocked his momentum off kilter, and his brain back online.

It was hearing the Devil trade His cane for one of the two sickles at His waist that put enough fear in him to be stupid. What was the worst that could happen, he'd figured. He was already in Hell.

He'd learned to scrap in nothing towns, fighting dirty in ways that the Devil could only dream of, and it was that rank recklessness that had him grip his fists tight around the sand and grave dirt that filled his pockets and fling it back into the Devil's face.

He didn't know if it was surprise or sheer dumb luck that let him tackle the entity that owned his soul, but he did know that he had one goal in mind, to disarm Him and run back the way they'd come.

The Devil's screaming faded into all the rest.

The sickle cut through the leather holster at the Devil's waist like a hot knife through butter, and Tango kicked out with feet that only half remembered shoes and bolted, knowing full well that he'd need to be faster than he'd ever been in his life.

Pain and panic dulled his memory, and he found himself lost without the Devil's guidance. He ducked through crowds of wailing souls, lost in their own punishments, pushing himself further than he would have thought possible before he'd died. He couldn't see what the souls around him saw, or feel what they felt, but he could hear them. Their anguish clawed at him, trying to pull him back, but it only served to push him faster.

He ducked through caverns and down corridors until, finally, he hit stairs.

Not the ones he *recognized*, sure, but they went up, and up was the way he needed to go.

Level by level he went, pushing through crowds and feeling his heart break at the sounds of suffering around him. He tried, once, to pull one of the souls with him, to try and break the sobbing shade free of her torment, to see if he could save one or all of them, but his hands passed through her, and her cries only rang louder in his ears.

He rushed on, until he found more stairs, and then he climbed.

Twice more, he followed that pattern, hiding among the ghosts whenever he feared he might be seen by the demons that lurked within the Devil's realm, and using the sickles he'd stolen when hiding didn't work. What little was left of his threadbare clothes was burned away by hellfire and the acidic ichor that spurted from killing blows.

As he moved forward, though, he saw fewer and fewer of them, until, at last, he found himself racing up a set of stairs guarded by no one. The souls that greeted him didn't scream or cry or beg for mercy, they simply turned to watch him pass from one staircase to another.

The bitter cold that greeted him made his heart stop in its tracks.

He was sure, for a moment, that he'd fucked it up, that he'd run in a circle and the Devil would be waiting to shove him down the next flight of stairs—

But no. He emerged into the bright glow of dawn, the sky lit with pinks and oranges that glowed on the snow around him, and he realized that he'd done it.

He'd made it back out, and save the sickles, he was naked as the day he'd been born.

And it was *damned* cold outside.

~

"Beg pardon?" Jimmy asked, in a tone that told Tango that he didn't know whether to be scandalized or gleeful. "You did *what*?"

"Looking back on it," Tango said, twisting his fingers together, "I think it was the grave dirt what did it, actually. I ain't no priest but I bet if you pray enough while you dig, some of it makes it through."

Jimmy's hands were resting on the crown of his head, his face open in shock. Whether that meant he *believed* Tango was something altogether different, but Tango would take what he would get, and right now what he was getting *wasn't* a fist to the face.

Jimmy made a thin sound that Tango only just recognized as a laugh. He stood at last, and for a moment, Tango thought about blocking the door so he couldn't leave, but Jimmy just walked to the window and back.

"Oh, I am raked," he said, voice muffled by his hands. He turned to Tango and looked him over, like this time he'd see something different. "Tango," he said, sounding almost like he was pleading, "I—"

"Please," Tango said, his heart practically frozen in his chest, "please just hear me out. I swear to you, on every grave I ever dug, this is the truth, Jim."

Jimmy squeezed his eyes shut. Tango watched his chest rise and fall with a great, heaving breath. Then, he gestured to the bed.

“Sit down,” Jimmy said at last, “you look dead on your feet—”

“Funny,” Tango said, the ghost of a smile on his face. Jimmy rolled his eyes, and for a moment, it felt *normal*.

“Oh, go on,” Jimmy said, exasperated, but no harsher than he would have been earlier. “If you were anyone else, I’d have hauled you down to Cub to get your head checked, I swear I would.”

But something about the stiff line in Jimmy’s shoulders told Tango that, just maybe, that wasn’t entirely true.

“Would you?” he asked, feeling a bit like the man who’d talked back to the Devil. Jimmy’s eyes caught and pinned him differently, though. Less like a butterfly on a pin-board, more like a man watching his bet win a race. The attention was thrilling and nerve-wracking all at once.

Jimmy rolled his answer around in his mouth for a moment before he looked away. “Maybe not,” he admitted.

Tango sat on the edge of the bed and kept talking.

~

Three Years Ago

“Skizz,” Tango said, his eyes locked on the men who had just walked in. He didn’t move a muscle save to speak, his eyes barely flicking away from his cards as he leaned back in his chair. They were putting on a show of it, a closed game, back and forth. *A gambler and a monk played a hand of cards*—wasn’t that how the old joke went? “Two o’clock.”

Skizz, bless his soul, wasn’t as subtle as Tango. He made a bit of a meal of it, stretching to give himself an excuse to look up and over his shoulder. Tango winced as Skizz met the eyes of the shorter stranger who had just waltzed in.

Fortunately for Tango, Skizz was quicker on the uptake than he was on the draw, and he saw the moment that Skizz realized what he was looking at. The taller man, with hair so blond it was nearly white, paid them no mind, but Tango saw that he was as attuned to his companion as a man could be. His face was partially covered by a dust-ridden bandana over his nose, and his coat hung tight around his shoulders, giving the illusion that it was tailored snugly, but by the way it hung, Tango could see that it hid at least one holster. Disarming to the common man, and hard to notice unless you knew how to look. Unfortunately for these two, Tango had been around when these tricks were being perfected, and he more than knew what to look for.

His companion was shorter, his dark hair windswept, making his curls look stand up on end in places. A sure sign of a fast horse, then, or at least one that could be pushed to one hell of a gallop by an experienced rider. His weapons were not as hidden as those of his friend. Tango thought he recognized gun belts on the both of them; that wasn’t a shock, in these parts. What

was concerning was the blade he could see in the shorter fellow's boot, and the promise of less obvious weapons on his friend.

These were not a couple of weary travelers, but a pair of bandits. Just like them.

And Skizz had made eye contact with them.

Tango let his chair fall back onto all four legs in time for the dark-haired man to change his trajectory and start moving towards them. His companion faltered in his course, glancing from the man to their original destination, but only hesitated for half a breath before he was on the other man's heels.

"This an open table?" he asked when he reached Tango and Skizz. Tango smiled, all teeth, and had a refusal on his tongue when he caught the eye of the taller man.

The smile faltered and fell.

The man's eyes widened over the bandana he wore, and he reached out, gripping his companion tightly, stopping him in his tracks. He kept his posture turned half away from the table, as if ready to run at a moment's notice. Pale eyebrows furrowed over his eyes, one of which blazed in the darkness, as red as hellfire between them.

As red as Tango's.

He looked at Tango, and for the first time since he'd crawled out of an open grave and heard the gates of hell slam shut behind him, Tango felt like someone was actually seeing *him*.

For a moment, the four of them stayed stock-still, the world around them faded and frozen. All Tango could think of was bad air in a mine. All it would take was one wrong breath and the rest of the saloon would explode. Tango could feel Skizz's eyes on him, but it was all he could do to keep breathing, to not shove out of his chair and toward the nearest exit—the window behind him and to the left, the reason he'd chosen this table in the first place—as he waited for judgement to fall on him for the second time.

Maybe he's like you, said a little, treacherous voice at the back of his mind.

"Sure!" said Skizz, voice too loud as it carried across the suddenly silent saloon. Tango jumped, wincing as the strange energy shattered around them. "The more the merrier!"

Tango glanced over at his friend, only to see that Skizz's eyes were fixed right back at him, his smile wide but clearly worried.

Tango settled back in his chair, and kicked another one out towards the newcomers, invitation plain.

He'd play along with Skizz, he decided. Every other option felt like suicide.

He'd stopped looking at Jimmy at some point after they'd swapped places, Jimmy pacing slow lines across the room while he listened to Tango talk himself hoarse on the bed.

Tango locked his eyes on the door, taking note of where he'd hung his belt on the hook beside it. Jimmy's guns were still on his hips, a thought that should maybe have scared him, but it didn't.

Tango faltered, thinking of Skizz, of the way he'd grinned at Tango without a care in the world, even as he'd been held hostage. Collateral for a job the Red Hands didn't want to do themselves. Insurance that Bettermost wouldn't run off with the goods. He remembered the gleam of a gun in some nobody's hand, an easy enough threat to understand: *do as we ask, or your friend eats lead.*

He hadn't been a nobody when they'd come back around. Ren's second in command, a rough and tumble type named Joel, had been cleared off or killed by that same nobody, and he seemed to relish the promotion.

"Meeting Etho," he said, "and—and Bdubs, a'course, I really thought things were going to be... good, I guess. But I should have taken Skizz and ran the second I found out what it was Etho did."

The sound of a body hitting dirt echoed in his ears, a surer sign of finality than the snap of any rope or crack of any pistol. Men'd survived being hanged. Men had survived being shot.

He didn't know a single man who'd walked away from a fall like that.

It haunted him, every waking moment knowing that if he'd popped back up on Earth a few miles either direction, Skizz might well be alive.

There was a silence that had quickly become familiar to him, and then, to Tango's shock, the bed dipped beside him, and a hand landed on his shoulder.

"What *does* Etho do?" Jimmy asked, as if realizing they had finally reached the heart of the matter.

"He hunts people. People with contracts, who belong in Hell."

"People... like you?" Jimmy asked, as if he didn't fully believe it, but Tango could practically taste Jimmy's fear. He turned and gave his sheriff a sad smile, wishing he could convey in it all the remorse he carried within him for bringing this to Del Sombra, even unwittingly.

"People like me," he agreed.

~

Two Years Ago

"What's her name?" Tango asked as he relieved Etho as Night Hawk. The quartet of horses were settling in for the night, and the horse that Etho rode stood across the campsite from the

rest. Tango felt a bit bad for the old girl, but the other horses shied away from her, sensing that she wasn't like them. Etho stayed near her, to keep her company in their absence.

Etho turned to look at him, even as he settled in beside his horse.

"She hasn't got a name," he admitted, "not one that I've been told, anyway."

Tango rolled his eyes, "well she's *your* horse, ain't she?"

"No, Tango, she isn't," Etho said, his voice going a little more flowery on the vowels, a sure sign that he was getting irritated enough for his accent to thicken. "I ride her, and I take care of her, but we both know she doesn't *belong* to me. She belongs to... our mutual friend."

That was what Etho called Him, whenever he had to talk about Old Scratch. *Their mutual friend*, like He was someone that Etho and Tango had worked a line with. Tango couldn't begrudge him the superstition; he wanted the Devil's eyes on him even less than Etho did.

"She takes me where I need to go, makes it so I can collect on the souls that belong to him, and then she brings me back to Bdubs."

Tango couldn't move. He barely breathed as he looked at Etho. He'd been so sure that Etho was just like he was, someone who'd made it out—

"You... *collect* the souls?" he bit out, not sure if it was anger heating his words, or fear. "For *Him*?"

"When the contracts come due," Etho confirmed, leaning back against his nameless horse. After a moment, he shot back upwards, startling his horse. She snorted at him, turning half his loose hair to icicles. "Not you, though," he added, quickly, his accent blurring his words together. Any minute now, he'd start speaking that nonsense French that only he and Bdubs seemed to understand. "I don't—I can't collect on you. You don't have a contract. No trail to follow."

Tango nodded stiffly. He forced himself to breathe the way Skizz had taught him when he'd caught him panicking on a train. In, out. Easy. Then, carefully, he let his eyes slide sideways, back to Etho, and let his concentration slip, on purpose.

He wasn't sure what had done it, but his trip to Hell had changed how he saw the world. It had taken him a full few weeks with Skizz to be able to even tell what his face looked like. For the first days, every living thing he ran across had been awash with color, reminiscent of the way that the damned had looked like after death. It was what had drawn him to Skizz—the light that shone from him was spectacular. It was big and bright and beautiful, and more than that, Tango thought it was trustworthy.

He hadn't bothered doing that with anyone, since he'd figured out how to rein it in. For a while, part of him had been afraid that if he let himself do it, he wouldn't be able to stop again. He didn't know if what he was seeing was a soul, or just the sum of a person's parts, all fused into one thing, the culmination of a lifetime's decisions that swirled around inside of

them until death. Either way, it wasn't something he liked to do, even if it had helped him trust Skizz.

He did it now. Let the world around him slip, just enough for a glimpse.

Etho's essence swirled in Tango's vision, a rich, deep green at the center, near where his heart would be, but it didn't stay that way. If Tango thought that souls could be affected by the elements, he would say that it looked like a man about to lose his limbs to frostbite. A cold blue-black crackled near his shoulders and up his waist, and by the time it came to his fingers, Tango could barely focus on it.

Tango could see the twisting fire-red band of his contract, strung like a noose around Etho's neck and manacles around his wrists.

The thing that surprised Tango, though, was that one of the threads of the contract led away from Etho. Tango followed it, just far enough to see where it connected to Bdubs, all vibrant, brilliant green, and looked back.

He forced his eyes to the ground and only looked back up when he could count the laces on his boots, instead of seeing the oranges and yellows of his own hellfire-touched soul.

Would he end up burned like that, if he made a contract? Probably.

Etho had taken his bandana off when Tango looked back up. He was twisting the fabric between his fingers, nervous.

"I... even if I did have your contract," Etho said, and with his face uncovered he was blamed easy to read. He looked like a man speaking the only truth that mattered, "I'd do what I could to let it stand, for as long as possible." Etho reached behind him, running the backs of his fingers along his horse's neck. "We're friends, Tango. I've got your six."

Tango thought about running, about waking Skizz up and heading across the country in the hopes they'd find a way to do their jobs without running into Etho and 'Dubs ever again.

He thought about the green, still at the center of Etho's soul, despite it all.

Even knowing that Etho rode a horse that could take souls direct to Hell, even knowing that if Etho found himself inclined to, Tango would be right back where he started, he found himself smiling at Etho. There was no place in the world for him, but being near Etho might just be safer than anywhere else. At least he knew that Etho would keep him alive, in a bind. And he'd bet a hundred thousand dollars that the Devil would never think to look for him at Etho's side.

"I've got yours, too," he said, at last. "We're a team, and all."

Etho smiled at him, relieved, and slumped back against his horse.

"You've got to name that horse, though," Tango added, before Etho could settle in for sleep, "She *is* yours. Ain't... *our mutual friend* who takes care of her, y'know. Any horse ought to have a name."

Etho chuckled, whether at Tango's discomfort at the euphemism, or at Tango's point, he wasn't sure.

"You sound like Bdubs." Etho said, his voice soft. *Fond*, even. "He's been telling me to name this horse for... *Deus meus*, six... seven—"

"Years?" Tango demanded, shocked.

"Centuries." Etho said, a sly grin on his face. And *now* Tango couldn't read him to tell whether or not he was joking.

"Name that horse," he ordered, aiming for a dangerous tone. Etho just chuckled again, and Tango turned away from the fire, letting his eyesight settle into the darkness around him, safe in the knowledge that he'd watch over his team until morning came, and they were on the road again.

~

Tango slumped down on the bed, his feet half hanging off the side of the mattress because he hadn't yet bothered taking off his boots. The silence stretched, minute by minute, between them. Tango wondered if it was a gulf he could bridge. Beside him, Jimmy was staring at the ceiling, one arm tossed over his forehead, the other idly picking at his nails as he mulled over everything that Tango had just dumped on him.

Nerves prickled at Tango's skin, up his arms and into his mouth like buzzing flies on a warm corpse. He opened his mouth to let them out, to say *something*, when Jimmy made a little sound. He froze.

It was a laugh. A tiny laugh riddled with disbelief.

"*Oof*," Jimmy said, at length. "I mean, really. Wow. *Oof*."

Despite himself, Tango snickered. Jimmy swatted his thigh, the only real place he could reach in this position. Casual, despite everything. He didn't move his hand back to the mattress, either. Just let it rest there, a silent reminder that he was there.

"I'm *processing*!" Jimmy protested, "you just told me that you died *twenty years ago*, Tango! That's a lot for a guy to wrap his head around."

"I told you a far sight more than that," Tango shot back.

"That's why I'm *thinking*, Tango!" Jimmy cried, the sound of it loud only to Tango, by virtue of being so close. Even in this moment, he was thinking about everyone around them, not wanting to wake their neighbors. Maybe even looking after Tango's secrets, already. The thought lifted his spirits, a little. Enough to ask,

"Not going to throw me in the madhouse, then?" he asked, unable to stop himself from sounding hopeful.

“Jury’s still out,” Jimmy grumbled, but when Tango looked over, there was a hint of a smile on his face. “Honestly, you probably could have come to me with something even madder, and I’d have wanted to believe you.”

Something about that hit Tango just below his ribs. When he spoke, his voice felt thick again. “Really?” he asked. He propped himself on his elbows, looking down at Jimmy. “I mean, I know how it sounds, Jim, I *do*,” he searched around for a way to finish that sentence and came up empty. “I’m not pulling your leg, though,” he added at last, feeling lame about how lackluster it sounded. Jimmy’s thumb rubbed soothing circles into the side of Tango’s thigh. Tango fought back a shiver at the intimacy of the gesture, at the ease with which it came, even *now*.

Jimmy was tactile, always had been. Whether or not he *ought* to be was a different story.

Whether or not it *meant* something was a possibility that Tango finally let himself start wondering.

He could still see the curl of Scott’s smile, a spider who’s just lured a fly straight into its web, when Tango had marched back into his shop.

“I know you aren’t,” Jimmy said reassuringly, cutting into his thoughts before they could get away from him again.

“I guess part of me is just surprised at how easily you’re accepting this.” Tango admitted. Jimmy rolled his eyes, a teasing grin on his face.

“Come off it, Tango, you know what Pearl can do.” Jimmy snickered, “I just had to change the way I looked at that and it all sort of clicked together.”

What?

“What?”

Jimmy’s hand slid off his leg, and even in his confusion, Tango mourned the loss, before he took in the look of utter bafflement on Jimmy’s face as he mirrored Tango’s position on the bed. Tango wracked his brain, trying to remember if there was something that Pearl could do that would make sense in this context.

“Tango,” Jimmy said, searching Tango’s face again, like *this* time he thought Tango was lying. Eventually he gave up on words and reached for Tango, tugging his neckerchief away from his skin. Jimmy ran his fingertip over the raised scar that Pearl’s bullet had left.

“Oh, her shooting?” Tango asked, perking up. “I mean, I didn’t really think there was anything supernatural about that, I just thought she was *good*.”

“She, no, Tango, she *is* just that good a shot. I’m talking about the—the other thing.”

“What other thing?” Tango thought back to that night, but it was all a bit of a haze. He could remember Jimmy’s face, haloed in lantern light, could remember him shouting for help, but anything beyond that was a bit dulled and grey around the edges. He’d been a bit too

preoccupied with the idea that he'd been about to die *again* to really pay attention to the people around him.

"Tango, she *healed* you." The words hung in the air between them for a moment before they crashed down on Tango. He shifted onto his knees and turned to face Jimmy properly.

"She *what*?" he demanded. Jimmy started to snicker at whatever face he was making, but Tango wasn't having any of that. "Hey!" he hissed and poked at Jimmy's side, but that only set him off in earnest. Tango spoke a little louder, but not loud enough to be heard through the walls. He hoped. "What do you mean she *healed* me?"

"Tango," Jimmy said, between great hiccuping laughs. Tango wondered absently if there wasn't a touch of hysteria to the noise. Maybe tonight had been all too much for him, "have you ever been shot before?"

"Well, yeah," Tango said, grimacing at the reminder. He'd been shot once before he died, and the memory was hard to grasp now, given everything between it and Tango, but he definitely remembered it *happening*. He remembered Impulse and Zedaph dragging his sorry ass to a doctor in the middle of nowhere, and remembered waking up three days later after fighting through a haze of fever and blood loss.

"Did it ever take you less than a week to heal before?"

"Uh," Tango said, feeling particularly eloquent, "Oh."

"Yeah."

"I'll be honest," Tango said, feeling sheepish, "I didn't pay it much mind. I didn't feel..."

"Like you'd been shot?" Jimmy suggested, his voice strangled.

"Yeah, that should have been a sign." Tango said and buried his face in his hands with a groan. "Why didn't you mention it?"

"I thought you knew!"

"I'd've asked about it, if I knew, Jim!"

"I thought you were being polite!"

For a minute, they just stared at each other, and then Jimmy screwed up his mouth, trying to hold in a laugh. He failed.

"It's not funny," Tango protested, even as the sight of Jimmy laughing had the corners of his own lips twitching. He slid forward, so that Jimmy's infectious laughter wouldn't get him. He knocked his forehead against Jimmy's trembling shoulder. Once his face was hidden, he couldn't stop the grin from stretching across his face. Jimmy let him close, wrapping an arm around Tango's ribs and hiding his own face in Tango's hair.

“Not at all,” Jimmy agreed, unable to stop the way his voice trembled. “You just stood back up and thought ‘ah, that’s fine then’ and went about your day. Nothing funny there.”

Jimmy’s imitation of his voice was absurd, Tango told himself. That was the only reason he let himself fold and burst into giggles of his own. It had nothing to do with the way his heart raced or the little sparks exploding in his gut at how easily Jimmy showed affection.

“Shaddup,” he muttered. And then, because it felt important, “hey, thank you. For believing me. Even if you did forget to mention that your sister has stinkin’... magical healing powers.” Jimmy’s shoulder moved under his head, almost a shrug that he stopped partway through, so as not to dislodge Tango.

“I trust you,” he said, “Maybe that’s reckless of me, but I trust you, and I have trusted you, and I *will* trust you.”

And that... there was no reason for Jimmy to say it like *that*. Like trusting Tango, even now that he knew that Tango had gotten sixty-six percent of his friends killed and gone to Hell and crawled his way back *out*, was easier than breathing. Tango felt a lump in his throat, and it wasn’t the laughter he’d been swallowing, anymore.

“And,” Jimmy said, his voice a low rumble against Tango’s cheek, “and just so you know, I’d tell you my secrets too, if I knew what happened. I can tell you about Pearl, and I know we left because Grian, blamed fool that he is, dueled one of our friends and won. But I don’t know why, and I don’t know how—”

As far as Tango was aware, none of the Ratcliffe family had ever spoken about what brought them to Del Sombra. No one knew any details, no one knew more than a few tidbits here and there. That Jimmy would willingly tell him, if he knew...

As Jimmy trailed off, sounding distressed for no reason other than not being able to confide in Tango the way Tango had in him, Tango felt something dangerous rise in him. Something a little like hope.

“Tell me this,” Tango offered instead, “if everything got cleared up tomorrow: if Scar was back to be sheriff again and whatever happened to you three was completely resolved, no questions asked, no consequences, would you go back to London?”

Maybe it was a coward’s question, maybe it was Tango’s way of answering for himself if reaching for Jimmy was worth it in the end. Maybe it was wrong for Tango to ask, especially when he couldn’t look at Jimmy, and wasn’t letting Jimmy look at him, either. He closed his eyes and pressed his forehead against Jimmy’s shoulder a little more strongly. Let Jimmy read whatever he wanted into that gesture.

Jimmy’s arm tightened around him, and maybe it was Jimmy shifting to a better position, maybe it was involuntary, but it felt like he was pulling Tango closer.

“I don’t think I could stand it there, anymore.” Jimmy admitted, quietly. “I like it here. It’s warm, and I’m not... I’m not lonely.”

“What, no one’s waiting for you? I find that hard to believe.” Tango said, asking without asking.

“There might have been, once,” Jimmy allowed. “I had someone,” his voice broke a little, but he powered through, “someone who died. It happened just before we left.”

There was something in the way Jimmy said that that had Tango thinking what he *meant* was “it was the reason we left.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

Jimmy sighed, his shoulders relaxing. Tango wondered idly if this was the first time he’d properly told someone.

“I mourned. I was still mourning when we got here, really, but it’s gotten easier. Even before it happened, things had changed. I knew it wasn’t going to work for us.”

“Knowing doesn’t stop the hurt,” Tango added gently, thinking of breathing in his first lungful of crisp, winter air after pulling himself up out of the ground, and realizing that Impulse and Zedaph would never do the same. That had almost been enough to kill him on the spot. It was fear that kept him moving long enough to run into Skizz.

“True enough,” Jimmy allowed. He sighed. Tango could feel the way that exhaustion tugged at Jimmy’s limbs, slowing him down as he pulled back. It was all clearly setting in after the events of the day and the heavy conversation. Maybe that was why, when he spoke again, he said, “now get your damn shoes off and come to bed.”

Tango ignored the way his stomach flipped at the words, and double ignored the way Jimmy’s face went red when he realized what he’d said. Instead, he turned away, so Jimmy wouldn’t see the same blush on his face and shucked off his shoes.

He felt like he should have been buzzing, wide awake after telling someone the truth. He’d hidden for so long, it felt surreal to have someone who *knew* again, someone who accepted him anyway. Someone who, he dared think as he drifted off to sleep, *cared for* him anyway.

He didn’t know how much care that was, and he couldn’t help but wonder. Wonder if Jimmy looked at Tango and thought the world got a little brighter, the way that Tango felt when he saw Jimmy, or if Jimmy saw him as a dear friend, someone worth trusting, but he knew which one he wanted it to be, even if he cherished the thought of either one just the same.

~

“Oh! Jim—Dep—Sheriff!” called a voice from across the street. Tango looked up from where he’d been fiddling with the hinges on the door to the saloon and squinted out into the road. “Oh, beg pardon Ma’am,” the same, unfamiliar voice called, and it only took a moment for Tango to see who it was making their way towards the pair of them. A man in a full suit, his hair slicked back, and with a moustache the likes of which Tango had never *seen* was hurrying towards them. Tango wouldn’t call it a *run*, per se, more like a hopping speed-walk

as he darted through the foot traffic. Tango glanced up at Jimmy who looked like he was hiding a smile.

“Howdy, Mumbo,” Jimmy called back. He glanced over at Tango and murmured, “our banker,” before turning his attention back to Mumbo, who had made it to the steps of the saloon. “Just Jimmy’s fine.”

“Oh, phew,” Mumbo said, straightening his tie. He didn’t appear to be dressed for the heat. “Listen, this might seem a tad strange, but have you heard from Grian, lately?”

Jimmy froze. To Mumbo, it probably looked like nothing was wrong, but Tango could see the sudden steel in his posture. Tango stood up straight and handed the screwdriver he’d been using back off to Hermès, who shoved it back into the bag he’d tugged it free of. Tango ruffled his hair and stepped out onto the porch proper. Mumbo spared him a quick glance and turned right back to Jimmy.

“Probably not since the last time you did,” Jimmy said carefully. “It’s been a bit chaotic out here.”

“Oh, right, yes of course. That whole business with the train.” Mumbo cleared his throat. He tangled his fingers in his tie. “Well, I only ask because he said he’d help sort through a whole stack of mail clogging up the vault on Saturday, but he hasn’t been back down.”

Tango could feel the worry stretched thin in the air between them.

Beside Tango, Jimmy was very, very still.

Tango reached out and gripped Jimmy’s shoulder. He forced a grin at Mumbo—*don’t shoot the messenger*—he reminded himself. “We’ve got to run that way later, so we’ll check on him.”

“And let him know,” Mumbo began, but stopped himself.

“We’ll let him know you were worried about him,” Jimmy said, and added, low, once Mumbo was gone, “Maybe if he hears that someone *else* is worrying about him, he’ll listen for once.”

“C’mon,” Tango said, instead of responding to that line of thought. “Let’s get on the road.”

If Tango had hoped that ‘getting on the road’ would help get Jimmy out of his own head, he was sorely mistaken. Instead, it seemed that Jimmy got lost in his own mind the longer they rode. The sun hung low in the sky, and Tango could see Jimmy rubbing at his eyes, now. He wanted to say something to Jimmy, to get him out of his own head, but he couldn’t think of a damn thing to say.

“It’ll be okay,” Tango said at last, his voice too loud. It seemed to bounce off the high stone and echo back to him. Jimmy jumped, as if he were surprised to see Tango still beside him. He slumped in the saddle, perfect posture forgotten, and stared out into the distance, like he could make the house appear.

“I can’t keep worrying about him like this,” Jimmy spat at last, his voice venomous, “especially if he doesn’t *care* that he worries us.”

Tango made a small, sympathetic noise in the back of his throat, as if that would help matters. He didn’t know what to say, really.

“I, I mean, I’ve been thinking about it, since you mentioned it.” Jimmy continued, and Tango sat up a little straighter, wondering what Jimmy was referring to. I left everything behind in London—we didn’t even say goodbye to *Lizzie*, which must have broken her heart!” Jimmy looked at Tango, his eyes feverish, pleading. Tango didn’t have a single answer to hand him. Jimmy rubbed at one of his temples, “Land’s sakes, who does that to a person? All I got for my trouble was a bunch of half answers, and—and pneumonia from jumping off the ship after Pearl, and *heartburn*, Tango! Let me tell you, worrying about two people like Pearl and Grian will take years off a man’s life.”

Tango didn’t think he’d ever heard Jimmy sound so vehement. He wondered if Jimmy had, either. He looked half-shocked at the words spilling from his mouth.

“I don’t—and I will, obviously, I’ll be here as long as they need me, but I don’t *want* to wake up every day wondering if my brother has decided to vanish in the night. *Again*. I’m not going to fool myself into thinking that he wouldn’t run off without me, if he thought I was slowing him down.”

“So,” Tango said slowly, when it sounded like Jimmy was done. He tried to avoid sounding like his heart was sinking in his gut, “You... what, are you thinking of leaving, then?”

“Yes,” Jimmy said, his voice a whip-crack in the dusk. Then, “No. Ugh, I don’t know, Tango.” Tango watched, staying quiet while Jimmy collected his thoughts, watching Jimmy rub at his forehead, clearly trying to stave off a headache. “Maybe not London,” Jimmy said, at length. “But... maybe I’d like to find a place of my own, where I can be... Well, somewhere I wouldn’t have to be afraid of fleeing in the night.”

“Well,” Tango said, tightening his fists on the reins of the horse he’d come to think of as his own, “if you need a guide to a place like that, I’m no stranger to traveling.”

It wasn’t the bravest thing he’d ever done, but he thought it might have been close. He caught Jimmy’s eye, and hoped he got the message. *If you go, take me with you.*

Jimmy smiled at him, lopsided and perfect, and Tango felt his heart swoop in his chest.

“Thanks, Tango,” he said. Tango nodded, words piling up behind his teeth.

He hadn’t finished sorting through them by the time they reached the house, though not for lack of trying.

The shadows had snuck up on them when the sun started to set, and he could see the moment that Jimmy’s headache abated. His shoulders relaxed and his jaw unclenched. He started up some idle chatter about Keralis and the train schedule. Their conversation hung between them, a secret of their own.

It was almost full dark, now, but he could still see Pearl lean out the window, seeming to glow against the indigo sky, and wave. She was smiling.

All the fight seemed to leave Jimmy as he noticed that, too.

Pearl, Tango noticed, was a veritable whirlwind when she wanted to be. They had an answer to their question in seconds of arriving, and the next thing Tango knew, he'd had some cold stew put down in front of him while Jimmy quizzed Pearl between bites of his own about Grian's headaches.

Apparently, they'd gotten more frequent.

Apparently, they'd gotten longer, too. Tango didn't know what any of that meant, but he saw the way that Pearl gripped Jimmy's wrist, a silent reassurance that they were still there. They were still just fine.

"I promised, remember?" she asked once, when she and Jimmy were clearing the table and Pearl had clearly thought she was out of earshot. "He's sticking to his guns, Jimmy. He's staying put."

It seemed that, between blinks, he and Jimmy had been ensconced in their own rooms. He could still hear Pearl chattering away to Jimmy, talking a mile a minute, and he couldn't help but wonder why, precisely, she needed to talk to him alone.

It didn't really matter, he thought, looking around the quiet, empty room.

He'd never actually had a space to himself, before. From the moment he was born, he'd been surrounded by people: the families in the company housing, Impulse and Zedaph, Skizz and then Skizz, Bdubs, and Etho—if he'd ever spent a night alone it had been a novelty for the sake of a job.

He couldn't imagine living like this. Where was the *noise*? Sure, he could hear the footfalls of Pearl, and probably Grian, if the slower, more tired footsteps were any indication, but it felt lonelier than he'd thought possible. Even when he'd been alone in his room in the bunkhouse, it hadn't felt like this. He could always hear Jimmy just beyond the wall, and often there would be someone else on his other side, too. It was *lively*.

It shook him, more than it probably should have. He looked around the room itself. It was fairly large, much larger than the room he and Jimmy had been sharing—had *kept* sharing—at the boarding house. A good sized bed fitted against the back wall, a chest of drawers, and a writing desk made up the furniture. He should have relished in the perceived opulence, should have been delighted.

Instead, he just felt lonely. The room seemed cavernous and cold without someone else there to join him. He already missed the feeling of Jimmy at his back.

He meandered around for a few minutes, nosing through the chest of drawers (spare linens, talk about fancy), and idly wondering if he'd even be able to sleep with the quiet pressing down on his ears. Jimmy snored, though he'd deny it to anyone who asked.

The thought made Tango smile.

He went through the motions of getting ready for bed and wondered how he could have gone from last night, where he'd never felt closer to another person; to now, when he'd never felt more alone, even though he knew there were three other people in the house with him. He snuffed out the lamp, letting the glow of the moon outside light the room, and started work on the buttons on his shirt, when he heard a knock at his door.

"Uh, come in?" he called, not really sure of the protocol here. Jimmy peeked in with a smile and a little wave. Tango waved back, then kicked himself for it. Jimmy leaned against the doorframe. He opened his mouth, hesitated, and tried again.

"You know what I realized?" he said, clearly aiming for casual. He missed it by a mile. Tango could hear the nerves that laced his words.

"What's that?" Tango asked, his brows knitting together as he tried to figure out what Jimmy was aiming at.

"I never asked you to come here," Jimmy said, sounding a little breathless. Tango didn't notice.

His stomach dropped, "Oh, oh shit, Jim, I'm sorry—" he stammered, and Jimmy's eyes widened as the words must have registered in his own mind.

"No, no, no," he cut Tango off, stepping further into the doorway and flailing a little with his hands, "wait, no, Tango, it's... that's not what I meant." Jimmy's face was red now, even in the low light. Relief washed over Tango at the words. He hadn't overstepped. He hadn't *massively* misunderstood his place at Jimmy's side. "I meant that I didn't *have* to ask. You knew I wanted you with me."

Tango's face heated. Had he known that? Or had he just not wanted to leave Jimmy's side?

"I," he began, trying to figure out where his lips were supposed to be, so he could speak. His face felt numb, "well, I wouldn't have wanted to be alone, in your place, so I knew you *definitely* didn't. You're a people person."

"Yeah," Jimmy ducked his head, hiding a little laugh. "I guess I am." Jimmy lingered, hovering in the doorway for another moment, before he patted it and turned to leave. Tango didn't know what to do. He knew what he *wanted* to do, but before he could decide whether or not Jimmy wanted to be followed, Jimmy was back, a fervent, determined glint in his eye. "Are *you*?" he asked. It took Tango a moment to pick up the thread of conversation that Jimmy had left dangling.

"Uh, a people person? I mean, I guess. Only for a few specific people, anymore. Most of whom are, y'know..."

"But you'd come with me," Jimmy said, sounding surer of the words than he'd sounded of anything else that day. "If I left." With a spike of fear right to the heart, Tango realized what he was asking. What they were *really* talking about, under all the blusteration.

He couldn't take it back now, what he'd said on the road, and even if he *could*, he wouldn't.

"I would," he admitted. "I'd go where you asked me to."

Jimmy breathed out once, sharply, like Tango had lifted an enormous weight off his shoulders. He nodded and came further into the room.

Tango felt his breath hitch. Suddenly, his palms seemed very sweaty. Since when did his *palms* sweat? Discreetly, he tried to take a deep breath, tried to calm the way his heart was racing and get control over the various directions his mind was spinning.

Jimmy knew he was damned, he reminded himself. *People like you*, he'd said last night. He *knew*.

Jimmy knew all the reasons not to get close to Tango. Well, closer to Tango. Even if Jimmy would have been willing to kiss him last night, and Tango had thought he might, there was no way, no logic in the world that would allow for Jimmy wanting that *now*. It was why Tango had told him. A last-ditch effort to keep him safe. A final warning. An out for him to take now, before either one of them were in deep enough that a *later* would break their hearts.

Logic didn't stop Jimmy from coming into the room. It didn't stop Tango from looking his fill as he did.

"I realized something else," Jimmy said, as Tango took advantage of the darkness to admire how his face looked in the dim light of the hall. "I do actually have a secret I can tell you."

"Oh?" Tango said, his words caught somewhere in his ribcage. He knew what he *wanted* Jimmy to say, and he knew that he ought to heed Scott's warning and find out one way or another if his sheriff wanted him the same way. He just... couldn't imagine Jimmy caring for him, no matter what strangeness had possessed him, now. Tango tried to tell himself he was reading into it. He knew disappointment would dislodge the fluttering bird of his voice, and then he could tease Jimmy for whatever it was that he said. He was counting on it.

Jimmy hummed an affirmative, rocking back and forth on his heels like he couldn't decide if he should come closer or not. He drew in a deep breath, his eyes fixed on Tango like he could see Tango's soul through his skin and liked it. "I think I'm soft on you."

Tango's heart crashed to a stop, like a wagon hitting the bottom of a ravine, like the way a spooked horse reared up onto hind legs before it tried to buck you, like the dangerous jolt-and-swing of one of those fancy balloons as it soared into the air, ready to sweep you off your feet. And then it started again, twice as fast, twice as hard, full of hope that he couldn't bear to let himself feel.

"What?" Tango squeaked, when he found his voice, somewhere around the galloping of his heart. Jimmy moved at last, his lower lip caught in his teeth, and all Tango could think about was his mouth. He stopped in front of Tango—*too close*, part of his mind hissed in warning. *Not close enough*, whispered another—and didn't reach for him, though Tango could see the way his hands twitched, tactile as ever, wanting to touch.

“*And*,” he said, lowering his voice so that he was certain only Tango would hear. Like it really *was* a secret for the two of them. “I rather think I’d like to kiss you, if you’ll let me.”

Tango squeaked again, his voice thoroughly *un*-dislodged. He tried to find other words around the chorus chanting *yes* in his head. He couldn’t think.

This was what he wanted, more than what he’d dared to dream about, but now that it was happening, it *terrified* him. What if Jimmy realized he was wrong? What if he realized Tango was more trouble than he was worth? What if it turned out this was all a great big joke?

Jimmy would never, he found himself thinking. *If he says he wants to kiss you, it’s because he’s just as mashed as you are.*

Tango pressed the heel of his palm against his chest, trying to get some reprieve from the way it pounded, from the way the blood was rushing in his ears.

“God *damn* it Jimmy, you can’t just say things like that!”

Jimmy blinked, cocking his head to the side. He took in the sight of Tango, but whatever he saw only encouraged a slow smile, “Why not?”

“Because—because I’ll *think*, is why.” Tango blustered, aiming for confident even if the words themselves didn’t make sense. Jimmy laughed, low and delighted at Tango’s words.

“Maybe I want you to *think*. Use that big brain of yours and tell me if you feel it, too.”

Jimmy had never seemed so tall as he did when pressed chest-to-chest with Tango like this. They’d been this close recently, because Tango hadn’t been able to stop himself from indulging in Jimmy’s casual affection, but it had never felt like this. He was sure that even with the breath of space between them, Jimmy could feel his heart pounding. Jimmy’s eyes were lidded, fixed on Tango’s face while he looked for any sign that Jimmy wasn’t being sincere. He couldn’t find it.

Jimmy’s fingertips brushed Tango’s wrist, and the way he used Tango’s palm as a path to guide his fingers to twine with Tango’s own felt indecent. Jimmy’s nose bumped his. He could almost feel the brush of Jimmy’s lips on his as he spoke.

“I feel it,” Jimmy said, using his other hand to take the palm Tango was using to try and stop his heart from leaping from his ribcage. Jimmy moved it to press against his chest, instead, splaying Tango’s fingers over Jimmy’s sternum. Tango could feel Jimmy’s heart racing beneath his palm, an echo of his own, “do you?”

Tango was only so strong, it seemed. Feeling Jimmy’s heart beating, strong and fast and *sure* against his palm all but undid him.

Tango leaned his forehead against Jimmy’s, relishing in every point of contact the same way he had since Jimmy had first touched him, a friendly hand on his shoulder, and made it seem like the most natural thing in the world.

“A’course I do,” Tango said, choked. “But *you* shouldn’t.”

“Too late,” Jimmy said, sounding breathless. Sounding *happy*.

Tango didn’t know what to do with the myriad emotions bubbling up inside him. There was fear there, to be sure, fear that he was going to drag this beautiful, brilliant man down with him, but overwhelming all of that, all Tango could feel was his own delight. *He’d* made Jimmy sound like that.

Words pressed against the backs of Tango’s teeth again, a swirling mixture of ‘*you’d do all this for me?*’s and ‘*I think I might love you*’s clogging up his airway.

Instead of trying to find the right words and put them in any semblance of order, he leaned up, the way he’d been wanting to for weeks, for *months*, and kissed Jimmy square on the mouth.

The first brush of Jimmy’s lips against his was surreal. He’d gotten used to how gentle Jimmy could be, with kind gestures and light fingers on his arm or around his shoulders. There was none of that delicacy, now.

The hand that wasn’t tangled at their sides curved around the back of Tango’s neck, the touch grounding Tango in a way he hadn’t expected. Tango clutched at Jimmy’s shirt, feeling suddenly *very* aware that his last kiss had technically been a quarter of a decade ago. Sure, he hadn’t exactly *lived* all of those twenty years, but he hadn’t exactly been on the lookout for a committed relationship prior to that, either. It had always been pushed to the backburner—something to think about *after* they’d given up a life of crime.

Well here Tango was, halfway to an honest citizen, and he was thinking about it. He could taste every morning of the rest of his life on Jimmy’s lips, could practically see the ways that they would learn each other already, and it was thrilling in a way that being on the run could never compare to.

He pressed close, feeling Jimmy’s heart skip and race beneath his palm. His own heart seemed to sing in harmony with Jimmy’s—not perfectly in sync, but moving in tandem with each other, like the wheels on opposite sides of a runaway train: same speed, different locomotion, but always going to reach the destination together.

He tried to kiss Jimmy the way he thought he ought to: pressing as much feeling into it as he could, packing in all the words he hadn’t said and all the moments that they had missed together into a handful of them now, but he kept getting lost in the gentle, insistent pull of Jimmy’s lips on his.

Jimmy kissed him like he was committing Tango to memory, and he was going to take his time doing it. He kissed Tango like they had all the time in the world.

Tango pulled back, dragging in a gasp of air and balled his fist in Jimmy’s shirt. It was all so much, and not nearly enough at the same time. He searched Jimmy’s face for any sign of regret, but all he could see was the way Jimmy’s eyes had gone lidded, the slight part to his lips and the flush to his cheeks.

“Are you sure—?” Tango asked. Whether he meant sure about *this* or sure about *Tango*, Tango had no idea.

Jimmy let go of Tango’s hand and reached up, so Tango’s face was cradled in his palms.

“Never been surer of anything in my life,” Jimmy said, after a moment. He pressed a kiss, lighter than air, to Tango’s lips, to his cheeks, to his forehead, wicking away Tango’s doubt with each deliberate motion. Giddiness bubbled up in its wake, making Tango feel greener than a California Pine, young and eager and full of life.

“Stop that,” he chuckled.

“Stop what?” Jimmy asked. Tango could feel the stretch of his smile against his mouth.

“Making me so damned happy.”

“Oh, *that*. No can-do. I think I’m going to try and make you happy every day for the rest of your life.”

Tango’s stomach flipped, and he could feel reality pressing at the door, reminding them of what hung overhead.

“That might not be long at all,” he reminded Jimmy. If Bdubs were to find out that Tango was soft on someone, let alone how *much* Jimmy meant to him, he had a feeling that things would get ugly. Bdubs had never reacted *rationally* when slighted, let alone betrayed. And whatever Bdubs wanted, Etho went along with.

“Then” Jimmy said, bringing Tango back into the moment, “I’ve got a lot of happy to cram into however long we’ve got.”

When Jimmy kissed him again, it was like some great dam had been opened, and all of the urgency and lost time that had accumulated in Tango was finally echoed in Jimmy. It was all Tango could do to hold onto him and give as good as he got, committing every feeling and noise to memory. Sparks danced along every place Jimmy’s fingers landed, setting Tango ablaze. The warmth of him settled under Tango’s skin, leeching into his bones and alighting every spot that Tango had thought long dead or dormant. Tango, ever the thief, stole every gasp and sigh he could from Jimmy, desperate to know that even if he died tomorrow, Jimmy would have something good to remember him by.

As the moon rose into the circle of stars above them, Tango realized that while he’d never had a place to call home before, that had to be what he felt now. Home, love, safety.

It was better than any bit of Heaven Tango would never see.

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Tango woke to Jimmy sliding out of the bed, clearly trying to be quiet. The world seemed brighter in the dawn than it had any right to. Tango didn’t catch a single shadow under Jimmy’s eye or in the hollow of his throat. Instead, everything seemed to glow.

He reached out and snagged his Belvidere around the waist and tugged him back down, if only because he was allowed to. Jimmy made a noise like a punched-out squeak of surprise.

“Tango!” he hissed, turning to look at Tango, who did not bother toning down the grin on his face before he caught Jimmy’s mouth in a kiss. It was an awkward angle, but it didn’t stop Jimmy from practically melting the moment that Tango’s lips met his.

“Hmm?” Tango asked as he pulled away, “something you needed?” Jimmy stared at his mouth a little longer than Tango thought that he meant to.

“Pearl’s gonna give me an earful if I don’t get back to my own bed before breakfast. Something about needing to be a proper host,” Jimmy trailed off, seemingly caught in his own thoughts. Tango didn’t have to wonder what they were, however, because Jimmy leaned in close again, twisting so he could tilt Tango’s face up to meet his own. “Oh gosh,” he said, giddy, when Tango let him pull back again. “I can just do that whenever I want to, now, huh?”

“Well maybe not *whenever*,” Tango teased, “we do still need to breathe.”

Jimmy seemed to internally debate the accuracy of this statement for a moment before he flapped his hands around his head, as if to dispel the errant thoughts distracting him.

“Right, *right*, I’ve got to get up. Make food. Avoid Pearl because she’ll laugh at me.”

“Sounds like a game plan.” Tango said, lounging back so he could enjoy the view of Jimmy concentrating on his plan. Now that he *could* openly ogle Jimmy, he planned to do so at every available opportunity. He would ignore the pangs of guilt that came whenever he remembered that Jimmy deserved the world, and he could only offer a life with a man who might be carted off by a Hellish emissary at any moment. A man that might get *him* carted off, too.

But Jimmy had made his choice. Despite it all, he’d chosen Tango, and Tango was going to honor that by letting him. Jimmy had gotten to make few enough choices with his life. Even if this was a mistake, and Tango was selfish in not fighting him on it, Tango was going to let it be *Jimmy’s* mistake to make, wholly and completely. The man deserved that much from him.

Besides, all the afterlife over knew that Tango was a selfish man. He wasn’t going to let it get him down.

“Go on then,” Tango urged, pretending that he was wholly unaffected by the way Jimmy looked at him. “I’ll be along.”

Jimmy closed his eyes, and with a deep breath and a display of willpower that Tango hadn’t known any man capable of, he stood and walked out of the room.

Tango couldn’t help a giggle at the way Jimmy hesitated in the hall, and the sound spurred Jimmy on.

Lucky, too, because a few minutes later, as Tango was tugging his boots onto his feet, Pearl appeared.

“You’re up early,” she said, peeking in through the open door.

“Ah, habit.” Tango explained, waving away the fact that he was an early riser because *Jimmy* was an early riser. “Sheriff’s day starts before sunrise and never ends,” he tacked on cheerfully, because that seemed safer.

Pearl craned her neck, looking for something, or, more likely *someone*, and waved for Tango to come closer.

“You’re willing to wake up at the ass-crack of dawn to keep my brother company?” she asked, sounding dubious. “*I’m* only up because I hardly sleep, anymore.”

“I’m not a fan of mornings,” Tango admitted, “but they’re easier with him.” *And better now than ever before*, he didn’t add.

“Well,” she said, and it took Tango a moment to trace the faint note of surprise in her voice to what he’d said. He’d been far too genuine, he realized. And she let him get away with it.

“You think you can keep him here for a bit longer today? I won’t lie, I’ve been worried something awful about Grian, and if I need to send for Cub, I want to make sure he’s not left alone.”

“Can’t you just,” Tango wiggled his fingers near the scar at his neck. It was surprisingly easy to get used to the idea that Pearl had something Extra to her. She rolled her eyes, apparently having *also* thought he’d known the whole time.

“I have been. He’s been too focused on... he’s been burning the candle at both ends,” she said, and Tango couldn’t help but notice the way her demeanor changed, catching herself before she could finish her sentence and changing tack, “and I think he needs to hear from a professional that he’s got to rest.”

Tango wanted to ask what it was that Grian was so focused on that he needed both professional *and* magical healing to recover from, but something in the set of Pearl’s shoulders stopped him.

“Yeah, alright.”

“I’ll check on him in a few hours,” she said, “if he tries to get up or do something silly, like work on the barn, I’ll have you or Jimmy head for town to bring back Cub, fair enough?”

Tango nodded. He didn’t think it would take much convincing. Despite his anger at his siblings, Tango knew that he was just as worried about them as ever, and that if it was Pearl asking, Jimmy would stick around even at the detriment of Del Sombra. He didn’t think Pearl would appreciate him saying so, however, so instead he stuck with, “Sure,” and moved to join her in the hall. She stopped him with a hand on his arm, her grip firmer than Tango had expected.

“One last thing,” she said, her eyes flinty in the morning light. It seemed as though the sun was shining directly through the window and onto her, throwing into stark relief the dangerous set to her mouth and the flat line of her eyebrows. “Given everything, I’ll thank you in advance for not breaking his heart.”

Tango’s eye twitched, though whether it was at being so openly confronted, or at the twinge in his arm at Pearl’s iron grip, he couldn’t say. She didn’t give him a chance to parse it, either, beaming at him as if nothing had happened and turning to march him down the hall, to where Jimmy awaited.

The way Jimmy looked at him was more than enough to keep Tango from worrying about Pearl. And sure enough, it was as simple as knocking his foot against Jimmy’s leg under the table as they ate and telling him they should stick around a few extra hours in case they needed to call Cub to knock Grian out by force, to get Jimmy to agree to stay. It was, despite the threat, one of the more pleasant mornings Tango had had in his second shot at life, if you ignored every individual morning spent quietly with Jimmy. Tango hoped he got a thousand more of those, and maybe more of these, besides. Tango and Pearl got along better than he had thought they would, and Jimmy seemed to relax the longer they went without biting each other’s heads clean off. Tango *would* have teased him about it, were it not for the fact that he wanted to keep him relaxed.

They chatted for a while after, when Pearl finally took a look outside. Tango saw her brows furrow in confusion, and her mouth twist. Tango turned to look as well, trying to see what had dismayed her, but when he turned, all he saw was the bright, clear day beyond the walls of the house. It looked bright enough to give Tango a headache, if he was honest, the hot glow of the sun had seemed to steal every bit of shade from the world. Even the horses huddled under the big tree outside were painted in bright, vivid colors.

“I’m going to go check on Grian,” she said, standing. Tango glanced at her as she left, then at Jimmy, who seemed to also have noticed her strange behavior. He opened his mouth to say something but was cut off entirely a moment later.

When it came right down to it, Tango didn’t think the scream should have surprised him. The other shoe had been falling for weeks now, and it was only a matter of time before it hit.

It was a noise of pure terror, and it put Tango in mind of a hundred souls he had run past or hidden behind on his way out of Hell. He could feel the heat lapping at his ankles, could feel the splash of ichor on his skin, hear the shrieks of the damned, and the only thing that kept Tango from sliding into memory was the way that Jimmy moved, faster than Tango had ever seen him move before. He shoved the table aside instead of going around it, and Tango stumbled after him, the smell of brimstone caught in his lungs.

He plastered himself to the banister as Jimmy rushed back past him, barely a moment later. Jimmy had taken the stairs two at a time, but when he went back down, Tango didn’t think his feet touched the steps at all.

He was out the door before Tango could blink.

Startled, Tango rushed to the only open door upstairs, where Pearl had clearly gone.

When he saw what awaited, just past the doorway, he froze. His focus narrowed on the bed, where Pearl stood, and his mind went blank.

He'd seen a lot in his days. Not only what happened when a man got on the wrong side of a train crash, but a hundred other ways a person could die. Trampled by a horse, stabbed in the gut and left to rot, beheaded, thrown out of a window—he'd thought he'd seen it all.

Tango didn't understand how someone could be laying in this much blood and still be breathing, but there Grian was.

He was flat on his back in bed, and all Tango could see around him was red. Pearl stood over him, her hands plastered to Grian's chest, trying to staunch the wound.

"What the fuck," Tango said, his voice a rasp.

"*Help me*," Pearl said, her voice desperate. "It's not working! I can't heal him!"

Tango swore, then swore again and rushed to Pearl's side, gathering up a sheet from the bed to use as a makeshift bandage. The wound itself didn't appear to be deep, and from what Tango could tell, the angle wasn't properly fatal, but the blood loss would be, if they couldn't get it to stop. He placed the sheet over the wound and Pearl got the message, moving her hands to help press down against it.

"Why isn't it working?" Tango demanded, casting his eyes about for anything else that could help them.

He looked down and back at Grian, his eyes moving swiftly from the floor to the task at hand.

Then, more slowly, he looked down again.

"Pearl," he said, his voice dangerous even to his own ears.

Beneath their feet was a circle drawn in chalk, and the symbols etched inside of it made Tango's brain itch. Not out of familiarity, but out of a sense of *wrongness*. In the center of the circle was a sword, sunk into the wooden floorboards so it could stand on its own. Tango glanced from Grian, to the sword, to the circle, and back.

Tango, who carried the Devil's weapons at his hip, didn't think he'd ever seen something half so evil as that sword.

"Pearl," he repeated, his mouth suddenly drier than dust, "why does Grian have headaches?"

"Is that important right now?" she demanded.

"It damn well might be!" Tango snarled back, fear turning red around the edges. He didn't let it overtake him. Instead, he let it fuel him, and did something that he'd only done once before, on watch with Etho.

Etho's soul, he remembered, had been frostbitten, burned blue-black and painful to look at.

Grian's...

"He's—Oh, it's too complicated." Pearl said, breaking him out of his thoughts. He slammed his eyes closed before he gave into the urge to look at her. "He's been trying to keep an eye on Scar."

"How?" Tango demanded, "Pearl, I have a theory, but I need you to tell me *how*."

Well, he hoped he had a theory. He was a bit afraid that if he didn't have a theory, he wasn't going to have good news for Pearl at all.

"I don't—he said it had to do with moving his soul independently of his body."

"Why can he do a thing like that? Worse off, why *would* he?" Tango shook his head, "Never mind," he huffed, "Take over."

He lifted his weight off of Grian's chest and reached down for the scythes at his hips. The handles slipped a bit beneath his fingers, and he forced down a memory—

Demons, screaming, claws raking at the edges of his clothes and digging into flesh so pained that it couldn't feel another thing. The spurt of ichor across the blade as he sank one of the sickles into the meat of the arm holding him back and sliced downward, with much less force than he thought he would need.

His trousers, smoldering away where he tried to wipe the ichor off of them so he could keep a grip on the sickles.

—And unsheathed the scythes at his hips. He held them up, one curving downward, one curving upward to meet it in a facsimile of a circle, and let them focus his sight.

He'd turned away from Pearl to do it, and so the first thing he saw was the sword.

He stared at it.

Then he stared some more, horror leeching into his bones.

The sword was a writhing *mass* of souls, some older, faded, and some new enough to give Tango pause as he turned back to the bed. He wished he hadn't.

He winced, a pained hiss escaping his lips as he saw, for the first time directly, Pearl's soul.

Most souls told the story of their person: Tango's, as near as he could tell, had been irreversibly changed by Hell. He couldn't necessarily *prove* it, but he figured it made sense. Etho's had been twisted, burnt by his contract, but still him at the center. Skizz's had been expansive, filled with the positivity that was so quintessentially *Skizz* that it made Tango's chest ache to think of it. And most souls were muted, somewhat easy to ignore now that he had the hang of it, buried as they were under layers of flesh and bone.

Pearl's was the only soul Tango had ever seen that seemed to sit *outside* of its body, a blindingly bright rose gold, the color the sky at dawn, that shone from *without* instead of

within. It overwhelmed his senses, swallowing the sight of everything else.

He blinked a few times, trying to get his eyes to adjust so that he could look for what he needed.

It took him precious moments, but eventually he saw it: a string of soul, red as a heated blade and faded, but *there*.

“Move,” Tango said. Pearl made an offended noise at him.

“Fuck *right* off,” she said, and stayed where she was.

“No, I, ugh” Tango said. There was nothing for it, really. He shoved past her, a headache beginning to form at the base of his skull as the light from her soul reflected off the blades and refracted into a thousand tiny needles of pain.

“What are you doing?” she demanded, albeit rightfully.

“Can you stand a little to the side, please?” he asked through gritted teeth. He hooked the end of the dull side of one blade around the string of Grian’s soul and tugged. “These things aren’t exactly knitting needles.”

“Are you—”

Tango ignored her, instead focusing on what he could see of the looping string of soul as he wound it around the blade. It wouldn’t cut, Tango decided, because he wouldn’t *let* it.

The blades seemed to dull in his hands at the thought, and the pulling back of Grian’s soul to his body seemed to move more quickly. Not *quick*, but not at a pace where he would bleed out before Tango had finished the job.

He hoped.

As he pulled more of Grian’s soul back to him, he started to despair, just a bit. There was something decidedly *off* about it. There were places it looked extra worn, places it looked bleached, like it had been left out in the sun for far too long. Or come into contact with something that it shouldn’t have.

Sweat beaded on his forehead, and Pearl was *still* talking, though whether she was demanding answers from him or just trying to talk to Grian, convince him to pull through, Tango wasn’t sure. He’d stopped being able to hear her over the sound of blood in his ears what felt like an eternity ago.

Then, with a tug and a feeling like the tide rushing to meet him, all of the unraveled soul seemed to stitch itself back together and slide back beneath Grian’s skin. He gasped, his ashen face gaining a light dusting of color, and his eyes flew open.

All at once, the room went dark. Shadows seemed to rush from Grian and return to their rightful places around the room. Before his eyes could adjust properly, Pearl reached out and smacked a bloody palm across Grian’s forehead.

Tango wished she'd given him some warning.

He swore, dropping the sickles as he reached up to cover his eyes. Tears ran down his face at the influx of light. After a moment, Pearl sighed, the noise relieved.

"Stopped the bleeding," she said, sounding exhausted.

Both Tango and Grian groaned, incapable of acknowledging the words in any other way. Tango blinked the spots out of his eyes. He felt a familiar weight settle at his hips and realized that Pearl had picked up his sickles and re-sheathed them for him.

Her hands were small, and still sticky with Grian's blood, as she pressed her fingertips to his eyelids.

He felt, for a moment, as if someone had poured cool water over his head on a blazingly hot day. Pearl's healing washed over him, knitting him back together. Pain that he had grown so accustomed to, day after day, suddenly abated. He felt the muscles at his shoulders loosen, and the numb spots on his back began to tingle, the nerves alive for the first time in twenty years. The bones in his hands seemed to settle, and the ache of where he'd broken them digging or fighting or dying vanished.

"Damn," Pearl said, "that's all I got. Hope it helped."

Tango couldn't speak around the lump in his throat. He didn't know how to tell her that it had, that she had done *something*, but that it was probably more than either of them had bargained for.

Tango blinked his eyes back open and found that she'd healed those, too, his eyesight stronger than it had been in ages. It would have been one hell of a thing to tell Cub. *Oh yeah, Grian got stabbed, and the sight of Pearl's soul blinded me.*

"Shit." Pearl said, but she was no longer looking at Grian *or* Tango. Her eyes were firmly fixed on the circle sketched onto the floor. "Fuck, *shit*." She glanced at Tango. "Watch him," she ordered, "make sure he doesn't do something stupid, like die. Tell him if he dies, I'll kill him."

And then she vanished through the doorway.

Tango glanced at Grian and focused his eyes again, looking for the threads of Grian's soul.

He swallowed, feeling sick.

Some people had larger-than-life souls, based on experiences or deeds. Some people had smaller souls, shriveled and uncultivated and painful to look at.

Grian's looked like it had been cut in half and rubbed with wax to keep from fraying. Bits of it looked like it had fizzled away in contact with something else, though those edges were long since faded and healed over.

There was something else in there with him, too. It felt a bit like it was staring back at Tango.

It felt familiar.

It felt like looking for Jimmy in the shade of the sheriff's office, like ducking out of the heat and into the shade of Cleo's shop, or going to False with a question and leaving his sickles at the door.

He shut his eyes tightly and shook his head. They could sort out the issue of Grian's soul later.

Grian, for his part, now that Tango could take a moment to properly measure how he seemed, *physically*, looked like hell warmed over. Sweat beaded on his brow, plastering his hair to his forehead, and his skin was pale from blood loss. Tango picked up a corner of the sheet they'd been using to staunch the wound and noted with some displeasure that he'd stopped bleeding, but that the gash was still there. Apparently, Pearl had spent enough of whatever energy she drew on to keep Grian alive and had none left over to *fix* the problem.

Pearl clattered back into the room and reached for the sword.

"Stop!" Tango yelled, before he even realized what he was doing. Pearl's hand stopped millimeters from the hilt of the blade. Something in him squirmed at the sight of her fingers so near the hilt.

He marched over to the sword and kicked it. The blade knocked free of the floorboards and skittered away from Pearl's hand.

He didn't know what the thing would do to either of them, but he definitely had the feeling that if Pearl touched it, something terrible would happen.

He shuddered at the thought.

He felt it in his gut, the same way he'd felt when he realized he couldn't slow the train down. The same way he'd felt watching Ren shove Skizz out a window. He didn't question the feeling, and neither did Pearl. What she *did* do was dump a bucket of water on the floor and start swiping at the chalk on the floor.

"What are you doing?" Tango demanded.

"Do *you* want to explain this to Cub?" she asked right back. She didn't wait for an answer.

She'd barely gotten the floorboards dry again, using whatever spare linens she could find, when they heard hooves on the ground outside.

Pearl rushed back out, and Tango heard the smack of wet linen hitting the floor of another room before she made it to the top of the stairs.

"Up here," she called as the door opened. She led Cub in to where Tango was still pressing on the sheet in a facsimile of usefulness. Cub didn't bother looking at Tango for more than a moment before he turned his attention to Grian.

"Where's Jimmy?" Tango asked, suddenly bone tired.

“Still walking, I’d wager.” Cub said, pulling back the sheet to inspect Grian’s wound. Grian moaned and flopped one arm, as if to try and bat Cub away. “He stuck me on a horse—bareback, I might add—and sent me off at a gallop.”

“I’ll go fetch him,” Tango said, “no use having him spend three hours walking. It’ll be damn near dark by the time he gets here.”

Cub shot him a look. It was a look that, unfortunately, Tango knew well. Mistrust.

Tango couldn’t even blame him. From an outside perspective, the situation was damning. Grian had been stabbed. Three people in the house had the opportunity to do it. Two were family, one was an outsider.

He still shied away from the expression.

“I’ll grab Bullseye and be back soon,” he said to Pearl, ignoring the curl in his gut that told him he would *never* escape what he had been. She nodded, all of her focus back on Cub and Grian.

Despite Cub’s clear misgivings, he didn’t stop Tango as he left. Whether that was trust in the man he’d come to know, or just focus on the task at hand, Tango wasn’t sure.

He couldn’t hope that it was solely the former, so instead he hoped it was at least a little bit of both.

Chapter End Notes

What a rollercoaster this chapter has been. Thank you all for your patience, I think by reading you'll absolutely get why it was delayed (cough, it doubled in length), and hopefully the extra work paid off! This was such an important chapter that I felt like if I didn't take the time to make it right, the last two chapters were going to suffer.

As I mentioned on my [tumblr](#), because this one butts up on the publish date for the next chapter, I'm going to be posting both chapters 11 and 12 on Monday, March 25th as a double update! Chapter 13 will probably also be there, but that's uhh,, me being a nerd and sharing my works cited, so it doesn't quite count lol. If you want to check that out you definitely can! I'm going to try and make it pretty and separate things into different sections so you can find what you might be interested in. :D

The amazing artists for this fic are [Hybbart](#) and [Foxyola](#)! Their work is going to be featured next chapter!! I am so excited to show you all what they've done :D

The Luxury of Fear

Chapter Summary

After the terror and bewilderment of Grian's near-death experience, Jimmy has had enough of being patient.

Chapter Notes

Hey remember at the beginning of this fic when I said none of the chapters were going to top 19k? Well please say hello to this freshly minted 20k monstrosity! Featuring gleeful abuse of R'lyehian, more eldritch nonsense, and art!!! The art will be linked in the endnotes <3 BIG Thanks to [Hybbart](#) and [Foxyola](#) for being such excellent team members and creating such wonderful pieces for this event!

I'm a little nervous about this one ngl mostly because it's leaning hard into the other half of the western/lovecraftian genre fusion, but I so hope you all enjoy!!

I am SO emotional that we're nearly there with this project. But instead of gushing about it, I'm going to just let y'all get to reading!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Cub had relinquished Jimmy's room back to him, swearing that he'd be back lickety-split, and Jimmy had smiled and nodded and waved him off back to town, like a good brother ought, and then felt everything that made him that man slough off of him the second the door was shut, leaving behind nothing but raw, exposed wounds in his wake.

Pearl and Tango were still upstairs, though Tango was hovering by the doorway, as if suddenly unsure of his place in the room. Jimmy, irrationally, wanted to never let Cub back through the door again for putting that look on Tango's face.

He closed Grian's door behind him, locking all four of them in the space. It was too small for this many bodies, but the window was wide open, letting in a breeze enough to keep them all from sweating.

All eyes were on him.

"Right then," Jimmy said, breathing out through his nose and trying to find the calm front he'd put on in the wake of Grian bringing Pearl home, the pair of them covered in enough blood to be terrifying, "I'm officially out of patience."

Pearl and Grian exchanged a glance. It was the same glance they'd shared a hundred times when they thought Jimmy wasn't looking, but this time, instead of steering the conversation away from whatever danger they'd neared without Jimmy realizing, they both turned back to him, pulling him in.

And suddenly, Jimmy realized that he had so many questions rolling around in his skull that he didn't know where to begin.

Grian sighed, shifting himself in the bed so that he was sitting more upright, despite the way that both Pearl and Jimmy moved to stop him. He smacked Jimmy's steadying hand away from his shoulder, but didn't object when Jimmy pulled the chair they'd been taking turns in up to the head of the bed. Pearl sat at the foot of the bed, turning to face Grian and Jimmy. Tango didn't move from his spot by the door.

Jimmy wished he could think of a reason to pull Tango closer, but there was something in the determined set of his shoulders, and the way that he was standing that made Jimmy think that he wasn't distancing himself simply out of discomfort.

It took Jimmy a moment to place it, but it came to him in a wave, that he'd seen Tango stand like that a hundred times, now, and it finally clicked in waves: His back to a wall, defended, near the exit, with his eyes on the whole of the room at once.

Tango was standing guard.

He caught Jimmy's eye and smiled at him, a small, private thing. Jimmy couldn't have stopped himself from smiling back if he'd tried.

He turned back to his siblings. Grian was looking at him, an indiscernible emotion buried in his eyes, and Jimmy couldn't help but remember his hands shaking around a bourbon glass.

Have you completely taken leave of your senses?

Unlike last time, Jimmy held Grian's eyes, and raised an eyebrow.

Grian sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. He took in a breath, and for the first time in years, he spoke to Jimmy without reservation.

Grian didn't say any of the things Jimmy expected him to. He didn't tell Jimmy he was overreacting, or that it wasn't important and here *was* the important thing, listen close now, Tim.

He didn't say any of the things Jimmy *wanted* him to say. He didn't apologize, really, or tell Jimmy that it was all for his benefit and here's why, or that everything was going to be okay.

What he did say was, "Martyn's alive."

"What?" Jimmy demanded, his voice strangled. He was sure that he'd misheard. "You told me—"

“I know what I told you,” Grian said, exhausted. “I told you that Martyn had gone mad, and that he’d attacked Pearl. I told you I’d had to fight to get away. *You* took that to mean that I’d had to duel him.”

Jimmy followed the logic of Grian’s sentence, knew what he was about to say before he said it, and wracked his memory, trying to figure out what he’d missed, where he’d jumped when he should have taken a step back to watch where he was going, instead.

“I never said that Martyn was dead.” Grian said, sounding relieved to be saying it. “Part of me had *hoped*, sure—”

“You were *covered* in blood, Grian.” Jimmy interrupted. He could still see the stains on Grian’s frock coat.

“A good amount of which was mine,” Grian pointed out, as if that made it any better. Jimmy felt his hands begin to shake. Grian didn’t say anything, simply reached out and gripped Jimmy’s arm. “I stunned him,” he continued, when it was clear that Jimmy wasn’t going to say anything more, “I—”

“You cut off his hand,” Jimmy said, his voice barely more than a whisper. He could see, in the flash of silver in the sun, a wooden hand, reaching for him.

“I—yes,” Grian sounded unmoored, losing the train of his story, slightly, “he wasn’t letting go of the knife for love or money, and I wasn’t... entirely myself.” Grian’s eyes narrowed, his brows pulling inward, the way they did when he had a headache. “How did you know?”

“You saw him, didn’t you?” Pearl asked, speaking up for the first time since Jimmy had gotten home from fetching Cub. Her eyes cut sideways, to Tango. “In Tango’s scythes.”

“Yeah,” Jimmy admitted. “I saw him.” Before Grian could demand answers, or Tango could do more than boggle at Jimmy and Pearl, or Grian could ask what they were talking about, Jimmy added, “All this time, I thought we were trying to keep you from being hanged.”

“If Martyn catches up to us,” Grian said flatly, “you’ll wish we’d *all* been hanged.”

Jimmy closed his eyes and tried to pretend that he didn’t know what Martyn looked like furious and determined to find the answer he wanted to hear.

“What else do I need to know?” Jimmy asked at length. “You said that he attacked Pearl, that you had to cut off his hand—” Jimmy stopped, feeling queasy. He’d always liked Martyn’s hands. The thought of him holding a knife, using it against Grian and Pearl was nearly unthinkable.

His eyes dropped to the covered wound on Grian’s chest.

Nearly.

“Grian,” he said, choosing his words carefully, “Why did Martyn attack Pearl?”

Behind them, Pearl straightened, interested. Jimmy looked at the interest in her face, at the way she was leaning forward to catch Grian's words.

She didn't know either.

"That's quite a long story," Grian said, his voice soft. He was being careful with Jimmy, but when Jimmy looked at him again, Grian's face was sympathetic, rather than pitying.

"You're not going anywhere," Jimmy pointed out. It settled him a bit, knowing that his brother *couldn't* go anywhere. He felt awful being relieved about it, but no one had to know.

"That I'm not," Grian admitted with a grumpy sigh. "Right then," he hesitated, then he opened his mouth, and in a voice that felt far from the brother that Jimmy knew, said,

"Go out to seek a string from sand and sorrow. Watch now, she is pulled from the heart at the point of a blade. Relate to us this strangest joy, only a drop of moonlight in hand:

C'hai ph'nglui. Fsyha'h ilyaa nalmg'bug Shuggagn."

As he spoke, the walls seemed to close in around them, and Jimmy thought he could hear the echo of hideous laughter and the feeling of thousands of eyes boring into his back.

Before Jimmy had a chance to recover, feeling more than a little bit like his ears were bleeding, Pearl spoke up from his other side, her voice an echo of Grian's,

"C'ai Phfhtagn Haisya'h, mg'ilyaa sya'h. naflr'luh-eeh Nyarlahotep h'ee. Naflhai h'ee naflph'nglui wgah'nhai f'ph'fhtagn."

Behind them, Tango swore a blue streak. Jimmy had to agree.

"Please never do that again," he said, his voice weak. Something about the strange language made his bones feel like they were melting, like his brain was being removed from his skull and unraveled and re-rolled like a ball of yarn. Jimmy blinked spots from his eyes and unclenched his jaw.

"Sorry," Pearl said, not sounding particularly sorry.

"That's all fine and good," Jimmy exhaled, once his ears stopped ringing, "but explain to me one thing: what does any of it mean?"

He looked between Pearl and Grian, expectantly. Grian didn't stop looking at Pearl, something pale in the set of his lips.

"Mine is the message I gave to Grian on the ship," Pearl admitted quietly. "'You called them, but something else answered your invitation. Why would they act, when they can watch?' Which is about as gibberish to me as what Grian said, even in English."

Jimmy turned to Grian. "Your turn, then," he prompted. A look at his brother's haggard face made him nearly want to back off, but he couldn't do that, now. Even he could tell that they'd reached a point where there was no going back. If there was someone who could stab people

and escape through walls or locked windows, then no one in town was safe. It was Jimmy's job to protect every last resident of Del Sombra.

"Mine was a riddle," Grian said, after another moment of silence, "that Martyn found in a book. It points to Pearl, or at least that's what Martyn put together from it. The bit at the end is an incantation to be read—" Grian paused and sucked in a breath, "to be read after completing a sacrifice."

Jimmy closed his eyes. He wished he could close his ears, too.

"Sacrifice?" he asked, knowing that he sounded incredulous. He fought down a rising wave of anger. Anger at Martyn. Anger at Grian for going along with Martyn. Anger at himself, too, for knowing full well that something was *up* with the pair of them and doing nothing to intervene. "Just what kind of book was this that it involved *sacrifices*?"

"It didn't *start* with sacrifices, Tim," Grian said, and the use of the nickname echoed their usual arguments so well that it nearly broke Jimmy's heart. Especially when Grian corrected himself, "*Jim*," negating Jimmy's need to interrupt and correct him. Like he knew that Jimmy needed him to be serious, instead of his usual frivolity. "It started because Martyn found sketches in his uncle's travel diaries. Sketches that Martyn thought depicted a lost civilization. The original rituals in the book all seemed to be for protection or harvests. It all just... spiraled from there."

Something clicked in the back of Jimmy's mind.

"The trip you two took. He got back and... accused me of messing with his notes." It had been worse than that. Martyn had been incandescent with rage, every ounce of it directed at Jimmy. It had taken everything Jimmy had to convince him that he hadn't touched Martyn's notes, didn't even know what he was bloody well talking about *to* tamper with. He'd left Martyn's that day righteously angry himself, and didn't speak to him again until Martyn apologized at a party, sidling up to Jimmy with a flash of teeth and a hand on his arm, as if nothing had changed—

Grian's face darkened. "I should have known then," he said, sounding like a man confessing his sins, "that something was wrong. I knew he was more invested in it than I was. We were both obsessed, of course, but he brought me in for the architecture of it. It wasn't until he found the book and the sword that I got interested in the culture, the way he was."

"This the same book that asks for sacrifices?" Tango asked. Grian nodded. Tango pointed to the corner of the room, where Jimmy hadn't looked yet, and added, "And that blamed sword?"

"Yes," Grian said, "though Martyn thought the sword was, ugh," Grian rolled his eyes, his lip curling distastefully, the way it did when he bit down on a piece of gristle, or Jimmy called the scissors trusses in the church 'house ribs,' "he called it 'set dressing,' belonging to a different cultural practice from the book."

"If you asked me to point to a thing that looked like it was used in human sacrifices, that's the first thing I'd point to." Tango said, sounding baffled. "Why did he think it *wasn't* related?"

“Why does Martyn Littlewood do anything?” Grian demanded, “he got it in his head that they weren’t used for the same thing, that’s all I know.”

“So, this book, this *sacrifice*, what,” Jimmy scrubbed a hand across his face, “I mean, what... *Why?*”

“The book was more than he’d bargained for. He thought—I mean, he was sort of right, but he got some very important bits wrong—that the book would allow us to speak to, to—”

Grian’s eyes went hazy. He clenched them shut tight and pressed a hand over the wound on his sternum. Pearl lunged for him and pulled his hand back before he could hurt himself. Grian dragged in a deep breath and squeezed Pearl’s hand once, his hand still clenched down on Jimmy’s arm. If Jimmy didn’t know better, he’d think Grian was using it for balance, instead of making sure that Jimmy couldn’t leave the room without listening to his whole story.

“He thought the ritual would let us speak to the beings that watch over the universe.” Grian admitted, sounding terrible, “He wanted answers. All of the answers. And he wanted the power they had. He thought that he would be able to do something good with it.”

“That’s...” Jimmy began. He wanted to say *that’s mad*, or *how could you have gone along with this* or even *I don’t believe you*, but...

He turned to Tango, who dragged his eyes away from the sword in the corner of the room just long enough that he could meet Jimmy’s gaze.

Pearl could heal people.

Tango was a soul who had remade himself after death.

Grian had been stabbed in his bed, with no one else around, and—

Jimmy could still see the way the sword glowed, shimmering in blues and purples, in the middle of some arcane circle.

He didn’t *want* to believe it. He wanted to believe that someone had climbed two stories through Grian’s locked window and escaped the same way before anyone had found him. He *wanted* to believe that sometimes miracles just happened right before people’s eyes, and bruises and broken bones and bullet wounds could be fixed with something so simple as the touch of a hand, he wanted to believe that Tango had gotten lucky, had been granted a second chance, but...

Miracles required a hand to pass them out. A second chance required a granter.

And if he believed in both of those, how much of a stretch was it, *really*, to think that Martyn wanted to speak to some beings at the edge of the universe, who watched instead of interfered? *Epecially* after all he’d heard Grian and Pearl say?

He turned back to Pearl.

“Who gave you the message?” he asked, hoping he didn’t sound like he was fraying at the seams. At the sudden attention, Pearl hunched in on herself, drawing her legs up to her chest and wrapping her arms around them. He hadn’t seen her do that since they were children, and she’d been watching over Jimmy in his sickbed. He reached out and took one of her hands. The three of them were connected, now, in a bizarre triangle, as the world slowly warped and reshaped itself around Jimmy.

She didn’t look at Grian, or at Tango, just kept her eyes level with Jimmy as she spoke.

When she spoke, her voice was barely audible. “The days I was asleep, I was dreaming. Trying to find my way back. I don’t think I would have made it without help.”

The words were chilling, settling down between Jimmy’s ribs like dread. He glanced at the window, still latched tight, and took solace in the sight of the sun.

“Help?”

Jimmy turned back to Grian at the horror in his voice. If possible, his brother was paler than he had been a moment ago. He was nearly as white as the linen shirt he wore.

“He apologized to me,” Pearl said, still not looking at Grian. Grian made another noise of astonishment, and Jimmy felt his heart drop.

This was something Pearl had never even told *Grian*.

“He apologized to me,” she repeated, tremulous, “and told me to tell Grian that Martyn would never have been able to speak to Them. They couldn’t answer, even if They wanted to.”

“Who did you speak with?” Grian demanded. Pearl shrugged. Jimmy gripped her hand more tightly. Her lips trembled as she spoke.

“I can’t remember.”

The words fell into the room and left silence in their wake. Grian looked like she’d just slapped him. Jimmy, who’d been getting that line for nearly two years now, was much less shocked to be lied to.

“Pearl, it’s *important*, who did you speak with? Have you spoken with him since?”

“No,” she said, “just the once. I would have thought it was a dream, if you hadn’t been so weird when I passed on the message.”

“You’re afraid to say his name.”

Jimmy jumped, having nearly forgotten that Tango was there.

“I’m not *afraid*,” Pearl scoffed, “but I’d rather he not hear me, if it’s all the same to you.”

Grian shuddered and sat back. He closed his eyes, and for a moment Jimmy thought that he was going to fall asleep, but then he cracked one exhausted eye open again. “Sorry Pearl,” he said, quietly. “I—that’s smart. Sensible.”

Silence descended on the room. Jimmy wanted to tell Grian to go back to sleep, to rest more after his ordeal, but there were too many questions rolling around in his mind for him to have the peace of mind to leave.

He wanted to ask why Martyn was so obsessed. Wanted to know what question needed answering so *urgently* that Martyn was going to kill Pearl to get it. He wanted to know how Grian had gotten Pearl out of there. He wanted to know where Martyn was now, if they were safe here, if they needed to run again.

There was one question, though, that really hung over their heads now. One that Jimmy was more than a little afraid to answer.

“Who stabbed you?” he asked, shattering the silence. Grian winced at the words or at Jimmy’s volume, and Jimmy grimaced. “Sorry,” he added, since he wasn’t sure which.

Grian gave him a wan smile. “Martyn did.”

Jimmy’s heart stopped.

“He’s *here*?” he wheezed. Surely he would know if Martyn was in Del Sombra. He would have had to come in by train, or maybe by horse, but Jimmy would have *seen* another horse. There hadn’t been a stagecoach in nearly a week—

“No, no.” Grian said, rushing to soothe Jimmy’s nerves in a gesture more fraternal than Jimmy thought he had gotten in eons. “He’s not here. He’s coming, I’m sure, but he’s not here yet. I don’t quite know how far Scar was—”

“Wh-what does Scar have to do with any of this?” Jimmy demanded, looking from Pearl to Grian and back again.

Grian hesitated. Before the silence could stretch, though, Tango cleared his throat behind them.

“You can explain, or I will,” he said simply. “Getting you back was no mean feat. I ain’t said anything ‘til now, because I thought I’d give you the chance to do it yourself.”

Jimmy blinked at Tango, who smiled at him apologetically.

Grian let out a slow breath.

“Thank you for that,” he said at last, “though between the two of us I’m sure we scared Scar witless.”

“Nah,” Tango said, “Man’s got brains for days and brass ones to match.”

“Care to share with the class?” Jimmy asked, with fond exasperation.

“I’m not sure how to explain it, really. It *starts* with the night Martyn went after Pearl, but my memory is...” he grimaced, “we’ll say *hazy*, since it sounds less mad.” Grian looked down, staring at the hand still gripping Jimmy’s arm. Jimmy glanced down too, taking in the sight of the faint scars criss-crossing the back of his hand, a memento of when he’d seen himself in the mirror and promptly shattered the glass with his fist. He’d gotten three hits in and was aiming to dent the silver backing when Jimmy finally hauled him away. “But I can sort of... extend myself, I suppose. I used it to survey the trail we took, to make sure Martyn wasn’t catching us up, and then when Scar left, I used it to keep an eye on him, make sure he was safe.”

Jimmy looked around the room. Neither Pearl nor Tango, even, looked surprised at this completely bonkers explanation. He glanced upwards, wishing for serenity, and asked, “how?”

“It would probably be easier to show you—”

“No!” Pearl said, her voice so full of terror that it seemed to echo in the room, “It’s too dangerous!”

“What’s too dangerous?” Jimmy asked, turning to her. Despite her outburst, she looked as placid as she had when Grian was explaining the things he already knew.

At least, until Jimmy spoke.

Her eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

“What?” she asked.

“What do you mean, ‘what?’” Jimmy shot back, “You *just said—*”

Grian made a shattered noise behind them.

“No,” he said, disbelief turning the word into a laugh. “No, no, *no*. You were supposed to be safe. You were supposed to be entirely *clean* of this.” Grian’s eyes shot to Pearl who held up her hands in surrender.

“Hey, don’t look at me, I didn’t do anything. I haven’t even healed the man!” she cried.

“What are you talking about?” Jimmy asked, suddenly feeling as though all eyes in the room were on him. Even some he shouldn’t be able to see, like the spider whose web was woven in the corner of the room, or the mouse they were pretty sure had made a home beneath Grian’s dresser.

“You can hear her,” Grian said, sounding heartbroken.

“He’s our sheriff!” Pearl said.

This time, though, Jimmy was looking at Pearl as she spoke. Her mouth didn’t move. A chill ran down his spine.

“Why shouldn’t he hear?” Pearl’s voice continued. This time, Jimmy could hear a dozen other voices in the echo of the words. Pearl’s just rang the loudest.

“Jesus H. Christ—” Tango said, behind Jimmy. Jimmy turned, half expecting to see someone else in the doorway. Instead, Tango’s eyes glowed in the shadowed corner of the room. He was staring at Grian in mounting horror.

“Tango?” Jimmy began, but Tango wasn’t looking at him. He moved closer to Jimmy, reaching for him, as if in the hopes that he could pull Jimmy away from what was happening.

“What *are* you?” Tango demanded, and the voices laughed. He recognized Gem’s in there, he thought, and Grian’s too, right at the edges. Pearl—the real flesh and blood Pearl beside him—squeaked. Jimmy thought that he and Grian weren’t the only ones hearing her, anymore.

“I am the silence in the mine,” the voices said in a perfect choral recitation. The room darkened slightly, as if a cloud was passing by overhead, but the sky outside seemed as clear as ever, “I am the faces of the canyon walls that catch unwary travelers, and I am the beasts that feast upon them. But that is not how you know me, Tango.” The voices said. Something about them wiggled in Jimmy’s brain like a worm on a hook, but he couldn’t place it. His eyes were playing tricks on him, too. He thought he could see the shadows in the corners of the room shifting, moving across the floorboards, but that was impossible. “You know me as the sun that beat down upon your back as you dug. You know me as the air between the feathers of the birds that waited for you to die. You will remember me as the dirt that could not swallow the rain that fell as angels fought and wept for you. I am ancient and nameless, and all at once, I was given a name, and a shape in which to reside.”

The shadows coalesced behind Grian, darkening to the point that Jimmy could no longer make out the pattern of the wallpaper. His eyes itched at the sight, trying to reject what he was seeing, even as an arm stretched out from the shadow and wrapped around Grian’s shoulders. As he watched, the fingers at the end of the spectral arm rested atop the wound in Grian’s chest. The hints of a face in the shape of a head leaned on Grian’s shoulder. Beside him, Pearl made a horrified noise, and Tango rushed forward to grab Jimmy’s free arm. Jimmy didn’t move.

He didn’t move, staring where her eyes should have been, because it was only polite. He didn’t move, because he knew her voice.

He had heard her laugh in the rushing of the river near the farms when they ventured down that way. He had heard her singing through the canyon peaks on sunny days. She had whispered warnings in his ears when Cleo was in need of a helping hand, or Hermès was up to mischief, or Alice needed a drunkard tossed in the cells for a night to clear his head before getting on the next train. Cleo’s voice. Gem’s voice. Alice’s, False’s, Shelby’s—

"You're Del Sombra," he said, breathless.

As far as Jimmy could tell, the face had no features to be spoken of, but when she spoke again, Jimmy knew that she was smiling. He wasn’t sure that that was a good thing, necessarily, but he knew it wasn’t *bad*, not when she was smiling at him.

“I am,” she said, even as she melted back into the wall, the shadows slinking back to where they ought to be. Her voice went breathy, quieter. Jimmy knew, suddenly, that he and Grian were the only ones who could hear her when she added, “my Scar has given me a name, and my Grian has given me a home.”

“She means,” Grian said, dryly, “that thanks to actions I have no clear memory of, I have a semi-permanent vacancy in the soul department, and when we came here she decided to move in.”

“It was me-shaped,” Del Sombra insisted, and then fell quiet again. The rest of the world seemed to rush back in. Jimmy could hear birds outside, and the horses, too. If he listened, he could hear the sound of the wind through the leaves.

“Oh,” he said, and both Tango and Grian let him have his arms back so that he could bury his face in his hands.

~

Two days after Grian finally woke up again, cranky and starving but *alive*, Jimmy had almost stopped hearing Pearl’s scream in his sleep. He had almost forgotten the way that Del Sombra looked, except that he could see her in every shadow he passed, now that he knew what to look for. He had almost managed to relearn how to smile, even as grief seemed to rain down on him from all sides as he recalibrated how he looked at the world around him.

He *almost* understood why Grian had kept him in the dark. Two years of this while they ran and Jimmy thought he’d either have gone mad or learned to accept it. He wasn’t sure which option was worse.

Despite everything, there was still normalcy to maintain. The next day, with a suspicious look at all of them, Cub returned and announced that Grian was well enough to come into town with them where he could be under proper observation as he healed. Jimmy knew Cub wanted answers. Jimmy also knew that he didn’t have any answers to *give*. At least, none that Cub would accept. Even the easiest one “Grian will be fine because Pearl’s been giving him a little bit of healing magic every few hours,” was something that Jimmy knew he couldn’t divulge to Cub. Not unless he wanted Cub to sit him on the cot next to Grian’s while he checked for recent head wounds.

In the quiet moments since Grian and Pearl’s explanation, he’d felt memories crawling up his throat, threatening to choke him.

The first time Martyn pulled him close and Jimmy made the decision to throw caution to the wind—

Martyn’s head in his lap, his hands dancing in the air as he ranted about the research he was doing—

The feeling of isolation as Martyn pulled away from him, stopped calling, stopped smiling, fully consumed by whatever he’d discovered while researching—

Martyn, livid, clutching Jimmy's lapels and demanding to know what he'd done—

Martyn, all cool, smooth smiles and apologies, a hand on his arm and a murmured promise that everything could be as it was—

Grian, demanding to know if he'd lost his mind—

Grian bursting into their flat, Pearl clutched in his arms, both of them unresponsive in wildly different ways—

Grian's eyes, staring at him, entirely void of color, no longer a mirror of Lizzie's.

They all took on a new light with the information he'd been given. He could see the thread connecting them all, could see what had happened to Martyn, what had changed him, what Grian was so terrified of.

He'd shoved them all down.

Thinking about it, he didn't know if he'd spoken another word to either of them since then, too afraid that if he did, the words and the memories would bury him alive.

"Hey, cowboy," Tango said as Jimmy came back outside after Cub had explained, in detail, how absurdly well Grian was healing. How long had Tango been waiting? Jimmy tried to focus, and let Tango loop an arm through his own to guide him. "Penny for your thoughts?"

"Where would we go?" Jimmy asked, instead of putting forward any of his *actual* thoughts. He put aside the foreboding, the realization that Grian and Martyn had gotten into something that he couldn't *begin* to fathom, the knowledge that it was coming back to haunt all of them, hot on their heels.

He's probably coming, Grian had said, exhausted after letting Del Sombra project herself through him, *he'll have an idea of where we are, after meeting Scar.*

Jimmy had no idea how to prepare for that.

He understood Grian a little better now, he thought. He would have run, too.

He hated it.

"What do you mean?" Tango asked, pulling him back.

"If everything was solved, nice and easy, and Scar came back to be sheriff again—" Jimmy paraphrased Tango's question from before, "where would you want us to go?" *Us*, he'd said, and the ease with which he said it startled him, but Tango didn't even flinch. He tilted his head, thinking about it.

"I hear Arizona's nice, this time of year." Tango said at length. There was something in his voice that Jimmy didn't quite recognize but wanted to learn.

“I’d love to see it,” Jimmy admitted quietly, bumping his shoulder against Tango’s. He was more than a little relieved that Tango was still here. Then again, Tango hadn’t run away when given the chance. He had confided in Jimmy. He’d *kissed* Jimmy. He’d heard all of that and still stayed at Jimmy’s side, even when a creature as old as the desert itself had spoken to them all.

Stars above, Jimmy was pretty sure he loved the man. He smiled over at him, taking in the red of his eyes and the soft smile that graced his lips.

Jimmy sighed and straightened, trying to shake the cobwebs out of his mind. He had to get his head on straight. If—*when*—Martyn showed up, he had to be ready for him. “I’ve got to run to the office. Got a few things to sort out over there.”

“I can—” Tango began, but Jimmy shook his head. He needed a few minutes to clear his mind, to wash away the worry and the gritty feeling of fear between his teeth.

“You stay here,” he insisted. “Keep Pearl company, say hi to folks for me, the whole nine. I should be back over at Sausage’s before sundown.”

Tango looked at him for a moment, as if trying to determine if he’d finally lost his last marble. Jimmy smiled at him, reaching out to swipe away a speck of soot that had smeared across his cheek. He’d never really had someone worry about *him* before.

He thought of Grian’s horrified voice, the heartbroken “*No, you were supposed to be safe from this*” and amended the thought. He’d never really had someone worry about him in a way that he could *understand* before.

“Be careful,” Tango said at last, as Jimmy’s fingers fell away from his face.

“I’ll just be down the road. If something happens, you’ll probably know before I do,” Jimmy joked. Tango tried to smile at it, but there was too large a furrow between his brows for it to work.

“That’s what I’m afraid of, Jim.”

Jimmy squeezed Tango’s shoulder, seeing as that was all he could feasibly get away with now, even though he wanted nothing more than to kiss away the frown threatening Tango’s lips.

“I’ll be back before you know I’m gone,” he promised, and forced himself to walk away.

Once he was safely ensconced within the sheriff’s office, he sat down at the officially pristine desk and placed his head in his hands.

He *ached*, his whole body felt like one large bruise of exhaustion. He could tell Tango about it, sure, but there was nothing to be *done* about it, and Jimmy never wanted to hand Tango a problem that couldn’t be solved. Especially when *he* was the problem.

His problem, he’d realized, was that he hadn’t stopped moving since the moment he’d seen Grian laying in a pool of his own blood.

His problem was that it had been entirely too easy to accept Grian's story, to accept the sight of a shadow creature—malicious or not—who appeared to have taken up residence with Grian, somehow.

His problem was that he'd spent two years grieving and fearing the entirely wrong thing, and now he had to do it all over again.

His shoulders shuddered against his will, and for a few minutes, unnoticed and unseen, he let himself do the one thing he hadn't once done since they left London.

He let himself panic.

Sure, he'd *worried* for Pearl and Grian, worried about their well-being, but he'd never let himself *panic*, never let himself properly fear for their lives. Grian had been panicking before he even cleared the doorway with Pearl in his arms and *someone* had needed to keep a clear head, send for a doctor, and try to keep Grian from scrubbing the skin of his hands until there was no skin left to *scrub*—and from there it had continued.

On the boat, Grian had been lost in his own little world, wandering in a haze, muttering to himself to the point that Jimmy had to intervene on his behalf, lie for them all and say that his siblings had caught an illness, and there was a specialist in America who had offered to help them. When Pearl had started to sleepwalk and had ended up stepping over the side of the ship before Jimmy could catch her, he'd only been lucky that someone had heard his shout for help, else they both would have been lost to the waves. He hadn't been able to panic then.

He'd gotten irritated, gotten angry, gotten worried, but he'd never once allowed himself the luxury of fear.

He indulged in it now.

For several heart-stopping, horrendous moments, he let himself be as afraid as he wanted to be, and it all crashed in at once.

It was dizzying. It was awful. It was the worst experience of Jimmy's life... and yet, it felt oddly freeing.

He gasped for air in the privacy of a borrowed office, hidden in shadow by the town that called him hers, and let everything that he'd bottled up break at once:

His fear that Pearl was going to die.

His fear that Grian was going to die, or worse.

His fear that they wouldn't make it out of London.

His fear that they would be caught, that they would all be hung, that they would be sent back with prejudice for trying to escape to America.

His fear for Lizzie, and what she must be dealing with in the wake of their flight.

His fear that he was never going to know peace again.

His fear that they would have to leave the one place that had begun to feel like home, before he was remotely ready to.

And at the end of it all, he dragged in a ragged breath and felt a weight he hadn't realized he was carrying slide off of his shoulders.

He was still afraid, of course, Lord knew that it would be stupid of him not to be, but it felt manageable. He had all of his people back now, in one way or another.

Grian and Pearl trusted him with it, *fully* now, for better or worse.

The residents of Del Sombra were counting on him. *Del Sombra herself* was counting on him.

And Tango had his six. Jimmy knew without question that Tango would have dragged him out of that room the second that he thought Jimmy was in danger, and there was something encouraging in that that he couldn't begin to name.

When the panic abated, when he'd regained control of his breathing and wiped the wetness from his face, he felt lighter than he ever had.

He gave himself another few minutes to compose himself, shuffling through the completed reports that Scar had let fall to the backburner, with everything he had still to do. The drawer jammed as he went to open it, and he peered into it. At the back was a scrap of paper sticking out of the sliding mechanism. Jimmy tugged it free. He smiled as he realized what it was: a to-do list, in Scar's scrawl.

~~*Bury dead*~~

~~*Find new preacher (? doubtful)*~~

~~*Fix supports in mine*~~

~~*Advertise mine reopening!*~~

~~*Find soup for Chef?? What soup??? How do you lose soup??*~~

~~*Replace postman – redirect all mail to bank, for now.*~~

~~*Contact railroad company re: ordering SV Line down here*~~

~~*Hire acting company to talk up town in populated areas*~~

Jimmy snickered at the contents of the list, still feeling a bit giddy at the sudden emotional release, and at the way Scar's letters curled together the more confused he seemed to get. Either this list had gotten lost before he could cross it off, or they'd never actually found poor Chef's soup. Jimmy would have to ask about that, later.

That *also* explained why Grian had been helping Mumbo with the mail. The man could stand organized chaos, but he couldn't handle a proper mess.

Jimmy put the list back down, on top of the desk, this time, where it wouldn't get jammed into the back and stuck in the drawer mechanism. Outside, the shadows were lengthening, and Jimmy began to get a little antsy.

A 'people person,' Tango had called him, what felt like a lifetime ago. Fair enough, Jimmy decided. He didn't really relish being alone. He stood, tidying up a little here and there as he left.

The streets were unusually quiet, empty, Jimmy noted as he stepped outside. He could see a few people down the road, milling around, attending to their business, but most people must have been indoors.

Jimmy stumbled, his center of gravity suddenly tilting as he was yanked backward, out of the street, away from the windows, and into the shadows behind the sheriff's office.

He got his feet back under him before he could fall and spun to look at his attacker.

His heart lodged in his throat, blocking the irritated words that had risen to the surface.

In front of him stood a vision in black and red. The same vision, in fact, that Jimmy had seen in Tango's sickles, what felt like a lifetime ago. A red kerchief kept dusty blonde hair out of bright green eyes, and Martyn's smile looked just the same as it had the first time he'd tugged Jimmy aside and asked for his help with 'schoolwork.'

"We-e-ell," Martyn said, his voice a familiar dream. Jimmy was afraid to blink. Perhaps panicking hadn't been such a good idea, after all. He'd need to tell Cub about this scientific breakthrough: panicking led to physical manifestations of the very real fears causing the panic.

With one *glaring* difference. Martyn reached up and tugged at the lapel of Jimmy's jacket with one hand. Light shone off of it, sending sparkles scattering across the wood of the building behind Jimmy. Nails and grommets gleamed in a polished, wooden hand. Jimmy knew that he was supposed to be afraid. Finally had all of the information of who Martyn *was*, and yet—

Part of him was still a stupid seventeen-year-old boy, absolutely besotted with his dearest friend in the world.

"Howdy there, cowboy," Martyn said, a smile that was all teeth and terrible promises spreading across his face.

Reality slammed back into Jimmy at full force. *Hey cowboy*, Tango had said earlier.

"Martyn?" Jimmy asked, half-hoping it wasn't true. He didn't know how to feel. "You're—" *here, alive, presumably sane, alive, mostly unhurt, alive.*

Here was the last bit of proof Jimmy had needed to fully internalize Grian's story. He'd spent so long thinking Martyn was dead—it had been the foundation of *everything* they were running from—that it was nearly impossible for his mind to flip the other way and accept that he was alive again.

But if he was alive, it meant that Grian had been telling the truth. If he was alive, it meant that he was nowhere near the man that Jimmy had thought he'd known.

He didn't know how to continue. Martyn, it seemed, didn't need him to.

"You're safe," he said, "thank god for that."

"*I'm* safe?" Jimmy asked, baffled. "I—what? How... Martyn what are you *doing* here?"

"I've been looking for you," Martyn said, as if it were that simple. His face crumpled and he shook his head. "I needed to make sure that Grian hadn't hurt you, too. After seeing what he did to Pearl, I knew I had to find you, too." Martyn's voice cracked, as if in desperation. Something about it troubled Jimmy. "It must have been so hard without her."

The wiggling worry at the back of Jimmy's mind snapped into place. Martyn was talking about Pearl like she was *dead*. Not only that, but he seemed to be implying that Grian had *killed* her.

Jimmy, whether it was out of dumbstruck surprise, or deciding to be wise for the first time in his life, played along.

"It's been awful," he said, letting himself crumble, leaning against the wall behind him. "And I haven't been able to write Lizzie, either. I don't even know if she *knows*."

"Oh, Jimmy," Martyn said, laying his flesh and blood hand on Jimmy's arm, "is he nearby?"

Jimmy shook his head, trying to keep some of the vehemence he felt out of the gesture. His thoughts had begun to spool up in earnest, spinning around like wheels on a runaway train.

If Martyn was here, it meant that he'd tracked them down. It meant that Jimmy was the last line of defense between him and Grian and Pearl. If he thought Pearl was dead, that was for the best, no need to disabuse him of that notion, but Jimmy wouldn't let him anywhere near Grian. *Especially* not in Grian's current state.

The problem was that Jimmy had realized what was wrong with Martyn.

He knew what Martyn was like, when he was present, when he was genuine, working to get the most out of life. He knew what Martyn was like mischievous, trying to pull the rug out from other people. He knew what Martyn was like, enraged, despondent, *distant*.

Even after all this time, he knew *Martyn*.

And he knew what Martyn looked like when he was lying.

Martyn moved his hand from Jimmy's arm to his cheek, a grotesque parody of affection.

The back of Jimmy's mind felt suddenly *very* crowded. Whispers curled at the back of his mind, hurling warnings towards Martyn that Jimmy didn't dare voice.

Get back, get back, get away, don't touch—

Del Sombra. He could practically feel the shadows at his back, swirling angrily.

"Come with me," Martyn urged, "I can get you away from Grian. I've made some friends, and we can keep you safe."

Jimmy pulled away, his ears ringing from the words, sure, but moreso from the cacophony of sound in his head.

Our sheriff, don't touch, keep away—

Jimmy turned, pretended to bury his face in his hands. Let Martyn think he was afraid.

He ignored the voices, ignored the loud runaway train of thought, and narrowed in on what was most important.

"What friends?" Jimmy asked, not really needing to pretend as his voice trembled. He was overwhelmed by it all, unnerved by Martyn's presence. "Do you really think I'll be safe with them?"

Martyn wrapped an arm around his shoulders. The whispers grew louder, hissing in Jimmy's mind. A cloud blocked what was left of the sun, shrouding them in dusk.

"You have to trust me, Jimmy," Martyn said, "these men are a bit scary, a bit dangerous, but they've kept me alive long enough to come back for you."

And Jimmy would be *damned* before he admitted that Martyn was saying all the right things. A month ago, Jimmy might even have believed them. Two months ago, he would probably have leapt into Martyn's open arms, certain that everything Grian had said about the duel was a misunderstanding. It's what he'd wanted to believe for years. This *very* thing was a dream he'd had before, he was certain.

The noise in his ears was getting louder, an ever-present hiss, now.

Cicadas, he realized. Hundreds of them, screaming for the first time since they'd moved here.

He didn't even know they *had* cicadas this far west. Despite the strangeness of it all, the noise grounded him. He might have been the only one back here, but he wasn't alone.

Del Sombra might not be able to manifest near him, but she could wake creatures that hibernated for over a decade, just to make Martyn take a step back and look over his shoulder at the sudden burst of noise.

"You came all this way for me?" Jimmy asked.

“Of course I did,” Martyn said. His words said that he’d intended for the smile he gave Jimmy to be charming. Reassuring. It stretched too wide on his face, pre-emptively triumphant. Momentarily, Jimmy had to wonder if Martyn had sharpened his teeth. He thought he had Jimmy on the line. “You know how I feel about you.”

Jimmy couldn’t help it. He laughed. It came out sharp, twisted, bitter.

“The thing is, Martyn,” he said, shoving a hand through his hair, letting the other rest on his hip. “I really don’t think I do.” Confusion flashed across Martyn’s face, closely followed by irritation. If Jimmy looked closely, he thought he saw an echo of rage, too.

“Come off it,” Martyn said, rolling his eyes. There, that was a little closer to the man that Jimmy knew. “I *know* you, Jimmy. And you know me.”

“Grian told me everything years ago,” Jimmy lied, his voice dangerous. Best not to let Martyn know that he was still processing that same *everything*. He didn’t know, at this point, if he was playing for time until Tango came to find him, or just wanted to see what Martyn would say, what tricks he might try and pull. How little Jimmy meant to him, after all. Martyn looked at him, doubtful, and Jimmy added, “After Pearl, he just couldn’t hold it in, anymore.”

“He... told you,” Martyn said, dubiously. Jimmy nodded.

“I thought he’d gone mad, at first.” Jimmy said, because the thought of Grian telling him anything *was* mad, in and of itself. Moreover, how could Jimmy explain all the ways that Grian’s story made all too much sense, especially since Pearl *hadn’t* died. “And,” he let his voice clog, pulling on some leftover emotion from inside the sheriff’s office, “it’s not like it much *matters*, anymore. Seeing as he’s dead. I found him the other day—” he let his voice trail off, trying once again to banish the image of Grian, bleeding out, from his mind. He shook his head and looked back at Martyn.

Martyn’s eye twitched at the words. For a moment, Jimmy thought he’d pushed the lie too far, but—*there*, he could see the flash of fear in the way Martyn bit the inside of his cheek. In the way his breathing stopped and restarted.

Whatever Martyn had planned, Jimmy realized, he wanted Grian alive for it.

“Right then,” Martyn said, halfway to hysterical, “in that case.”

A bullet pinged overhead before Martyn could so much as brush the holster.

Jimmy spun his gun, lazy as anything, as he watched Martyn look at him for the first time and realize what he was seeing.

“Get out of my town, Martyn,” Jimmy said, in a tone that he hoped brooked no argument. If Martyn argued... he didn’t know what he would do, but he knew he’d hate himself no matter which way it went down. The words rose up from his boots, crawling up his lungs and out of his mouth without him really knowing where they came from. “Del Sombra is **protected**.”

He waited for Martyn to argue. Waited for *anything*.

Martyn simply gritted his teeth and spun on his heel. Jimmy didn't take his eyes off of him until he vanished between blinks.

That wasn't a good sign, Jimmy thought grimly.

"Jimmy?" Tango's voice. Jimmy turned, half expecting a question, or maybe a joke, about why he had his gun out, but Tango looked ashen. His eyes were wide with fear. "Buddy, how do you know Ren's dog?"

The way that Tango spat the words made Jimmy pretty damned sure that they weren't talking about a real dog. Wait—

"Ren?" he asked, his voice halfway to a wheeze, "As in Red Hand gang Ren? That Ren?"

Jimmy sat down without consulting his legs about it. He landed flat on his back in the dirt. His world twisted, reoriented itself for the third time in as many days, and began to spin anew.

"Jimmy?" Tango shrieked, scrambling to Jimmy's side.

"M'fine." Jimmy lied. He felt frozen. He could feel the shadow of the sheriff's station cushioning his head and his arms, Del Sombra's attempt at keeping him from injuring himself too badly with his fall. This close, he could hear her whispering threats against Martyn and reassurances that Jimmy was fine. He didn't know how he knew, but he got the feeling that the former was very much *Grian* speaking, and the latter was Del Sombra herself, trying to calm Grian down before he injured himself further.

He wondered what it was like, to be able to feel the whole of the town the way Grian did. He'd grimaced when Jimmy had asked and said "headache inducing," as if that covered it, but it had to be at least a little reassuring, Jimmy thought, to know that everyone he cared about was safe the moment they stepped into the shade of a building.

The ice that had kept him prone on the ground, still in shock as he processed that Martyn, *his* Martyn, was the same man that had garnered the nickname "Mad Dog" and was known for ruthless executions, shattered. He sat up, nearly knocking his head right into Tango's as he did.

"We have to evacuate the town. We have to get everyone to safety."

"Wh—Jim, *where*? Del Sombra ain't big, but it's not like we can just cram everyone in Sausage's cellar."

Jimmy pulled himself to his feet, using the wall as support as he wobbled. "The mine," he said, the words not entirely his own. "They'll be safe in the mine."

"I can't think of a single *worse* place than the mine, man." Tango said, rushing to catch up to him. "Did Mad Dog hit you in the head or something?"

“Or something.” Jimmy said, marching back into town. He might not have Scar’s swagger or confidence, but he cared about this town just as much, and with the shadows stretching to cover his back, he couldn’t help himself from thinking that the town cared about him right back.

~

Gathering the townsfolk and telling them there was danger on the horizon was somehow easier than Jimmy thought it would be. He didn’t know if he’d managed to garner enough trust in his time as interim sheriff that they took him at his word, or if, for reasons beyond him, they had all been waiting for something like this to happen, but he was grateful for the outcome just the same.

On the other hand, watching Grian walk to the mines was an exercise in extreme willpower. All Jimmy wanted to do was dump him in the back of the cart carrying Hermès and the other children. He could hear Hermès’s voice, rising above the other noises, entertaining the kids with a story about a man who could fly and summon lightning.

Despite the gravity of the situation, he found a smile, his heart lifting a bit at the boy’s voice.

Some color had returned to his brother’s face on its own, but more still had come back when Jimmy had burst into the sickhouse and told him that Martyn was nearby. Grian had looked between the assemblage of Pearl, Cub, Tango, and Jimmy, and then told Pearl in no uncertain terms to ‘just bloody fix me, we don’t have time for this.’

On a better day, the look on Cub’s face when the wound closed, like it had never existed in the first place, would have been *priceless*.

“Where is Scar?” Jimmy asked, when Grian caught his eye and gave him a sardonic expression at the clear worry painted on his features.

“I don’t know.” Grian said, waspish, “I haven’t been able to check. She won’t work with me until I’m properly healed, which Pearl has *done now*,” Grian hissed the last words, clearly meant for ears that didn’t belong to Jimmy.

“Eat something,” Jimmy said, at the same time as Del Sombra’s voice seemed to rise up between them. Grian’s eye twitched.

“I’m disowning both of you.”

Beside Jimmy, Tango coughed to hide a laugh. When Grian rounded his glare on him, Tango pitched in, like it had been his plan all along.

“When I last saw him, Ren had a total of six men to his name,” he said, voice low so that no one else would overhear. No use inciting a panic.

“I didn’t see six in the house,” Grian said, his face darkening. Jimmy could tell that he was worrying about what that meant, given the circumstances. “I saw five, including your fellows.”

“No doubt throwing in with Bettermost ruffled some feathers. My guess is the others were killed to make a point or ran off. No one wants to trust the men who left one of their own to die.”

“Well,” Grian said, sounding a bit stilted as he spoke, “we can cut another two off of that list. I ran one off, and the other...” he grimaced, but Jimmy noticed that his hand tightened on the blade that he’d insisted on having on his person since they left the house. “Anyway, that’s at least two down.”

Jimmy cast an eye over the townsfolk. He knew that more than half of them were capable fighters. He knew that they would be willing to fight with them any day.

He also knew that there was no way in Hell or Heaven that he was going to ask them to, unless things went very pear shaped, very quickly.

He caught Cleo’s eye, and she raised a brow at him. He tipped his hat at her with a forced smile, and her other eyebrow joined the first. He sighed and turned back to Grian and Tango.

“Three of them, three of us.” Jimmy murmured. “Even odds?”

“Not by a mile,” Grian said, sounding oddly cheerful about it. “If Martyn is smart, and we know he is, he’ll have attempted to complete the ritual by now.”

“And that will...?”

“He’ll end up... changed. Unlike himself. More powerful, as he wanted, but without the humanity necessary to use that power for his original intent. And quite likely in a way that he never bargained for. Stars know I didn’t bargain for any of this.” Grian gestured to encompass himself and the ground beneath their feet.

An uncomfortable silence settled over them at the words.

“If Martyn’s done... *that*,” Tango pitched in, “then the safe bet is that Ren has, too. The pair of them were thick as thieves.”

Something old and sour twisted in Jimmy’s gut. The same bitterness that had come out when Martyn tried to play him for a fool.

He hated that he felt anything at all about it.

Grian’s hand on his shoulder was a welcome, if surprising, weight. He squeezed once, as if he knew what Jimmy was thinking.

“Anyone got a plan?” Grian asked, still more cheerful than Grian thought he ought to be, “No?”

“My plan was ‘evacuate the town,’” Jimmy admitted, his ears burning a little now as said plan was underway and *woefully* insufficient. The ground beneath them steepened, and they began to descend into the bowl where the mine entrance was. Jimmy saw Chef come out of

the little house he had next to the mine entrance. If he was surprised to see the entire town marching towards him, he didn't show it.

"Well," Grian said, with a smile that Jimmy recognized and was immediately wary of, "lucky for us all, I *do* have a plan. Tango, how are you with explosives?"

Beside Jimmy, Tango's own smile unfurled, dangerous and excited.

"There's no one either side of the Mississippi better."

Grian took the bag hooked around his shoulders and handed it to Tango. Jimmy had been baffled when Grian had given him instructions on how to open the false bottom of his suitcase so that Jimmy could pull it out before Cub dragged them all into town. Now, the reality of it dawned on Jimmy. It made a horrifying sort of sense, he thought, as Grian passed the bag over to Tango.

"Then you get to help me trap the roads."

Jimmy didn't like the sound of that at *all*, but he didn't argue. The conversation washed over him as he watched the assembled crowd begin to mill around. He could see Gem and Pearl, standing off to the side. Pearl was shooting Jimmy and Grian dirty looks, clearly displeased by the fact that they wanted to keep Martyn from trying to kill her *again*.

Grian seemed especially convinced that if he saw her, he'd aim for her, first.

Sausage had moved around to where Hermès was still talking to the younger kids, keeping them distracted, and seemed to be listening as intently to the story as any of the kids were, a small smile on his face. Scott leaned against the cart beside him, his lips a thin, displeased line. He raised an eyebrow when Jimmy met his eyes, a silent question, and Jimmy couldn't stop the automatic grimace that came to his face. He'd meant to flash a reassuring smile, but he was pretty sure he'd forgotten how to. Scott nodded, seeming to understand, or at least accept that non-answer for the time being.

Cleo was making her way to him, clearly not having forgotten their strange exchange on the way in. "That doesn't look too good," she said, coming up beside him. She was staring at the sky, where it had turned a sickly shade of green. Jimmy didn't think he'd ever seen the sky go *that* color before. "Just what we need, a tornado on top of everything else," she leveled the last two words at Jimmy in unspoken question. Jimmy did what he did best.

"All the better to get everyone underground then," he sighed. It was an obvious deflection, but Cleo rolled her eyes at him and didn't press for details. The Ratcliffe reputation for being tight-lipped was going to serve him well, it seemed.

Jimmy nodded to Cleo and walked over to Chef, who smiled at him, despite the fact that Jimmy had brought everyone in town down to his front yard.

"Time to take shelter, then?" Chef asked, before Jimmy could even open his mouth.

“Er, yes,” Jimmy said, losing the threads of the sentences he’d planned to string together. He hadn’t interacted much with the miner, hadn’t had much cause to, but he knew that he’d been one of the few to make it out when the mine collapsed, had helped Scar shore up the shafts again, and was always the first down new shafts, in case of instability.

“I’ll keep an eye on everyone, don’t you worry. There’s a main area that’s stable enough for us. No one will ever know we’re here.”

“I—Thank you,” Jimmy said, feeling suddenly choked up. “Cleo’s here in case someone gets past us, but we hope it won’t come to that.”

“Hope for the best, prepare for the worst,” Chef said easily. He patted Jimmy on the shoulder and turned away.

“Ah—wait, I—well this probably isn’t the best time,” Jimmy said, as Chef turned back to him, but he could feel the question gnawing at him, “Did Scar ever get you your… soup back?” Jimmy winced as he asked, but to his surprise, instead of Chef asking him if that was *really* important right now, he winked and tapped the side of his nose.

“Didn’t know we were in *that* sort of trouble,” he said easily. “Can’t spare much of it, but…” he trailed off as he went back inside of his house. He came back out with a small canister and handed it to Jimmy. It sloshed a little when it did, and the smell of it hit Jimmy’s nose like a bucking bronco. This was no beef and barley. “There y’are.” Chef said, sounding pleased. Jimmy was quite afraid to move. “Keep her away from the canyon walls and the rails and you should be safe. Well, safe enough, but a little rebuilding never hurt anybody.”

“Right,” Jimmy wheezed. And then, because no matter what Grian liked to say, he *had* been raised right, he added, “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it,” Chef said, beaming beneath his beard. He clapped Jimmy on the back and added, “seriously, don’t. Transport and sale of that stuff has been illegal for decades.”

Jimmy’s smile froze, but before he could tell Chef to take it back expeditiously, Chef had turned to the people milling in front of the mine. His voice was amplified by the stone around him as he spoke, as if helping him reach even the ears in the back of the crowd. “Right, everyone, the sheriff has placed you in my capable hands,” Despite the very dangerous substance he’d just been handed, Jimmy smiled, feeling more at ease for reasons he couldn’t quite fathom. “If you’ll all follow me.”

He stepped away from Jimmy and tipped his hat before he disappeared into the maw of the mine. Jimmy could still hear him talking, explaining the elevator mechanism and weight limit, even as he watched the rest of his townsfolk follow him into the dark.

He hoped he’d survive long enough to see them walk out again.

“What you got there?” Tango asked as Jimmy made his careful way back to last two people standing outside. They watched the elevator dip below the ground with the last of the townsfolk, and both Cleo and Scott raised a hand in their direction. Cleo wrapped an arm

around Scott's shoulders, but it was hard to tell if Scott took any comfort from it as they vanished.

"Made the mistake of asking Chef about his 'soup,'" Jimmy said, eyeing the canister in his hands with trepidation.

Tango didn't seem to share Jimmy's misgivings. He whooped, gleeful, and leaned over to take the canister with steadier hands than Jimmy's.

"*Now* we're cooking with grease," he said, beaming. "Those fools don't stand a chance."

~

Jimmy didn't know what he'd expected Tango to do, but using the nitroglycerin to blow every bridge and road into town save the main drag and the rail line was *not* it. He and Grian spent more time out in the cold of the desert night with the remaining explosives than Jimmy would have thought possible, too.

For his part, Jimmy sent off telegraphs to every rail line listed in Keralis's logbook, citing a rockslide that would need to be cleared before trains could pass through.

Just in case.

As the sun rose and the messages were received one by one, Jimmy felt a sense of calm settle over him.

His townfolk were safe, no one else would be able to come near. The only people at risk, now, were Jimmy, Grian, and Tango. It felt strange, being on equal footing with his brother for the first time in their lives, but he thought that even if he died today, he was glad he'd gotten to experience it at least once.

And as for Tango... he felt a lot less settled about that. There was a part of him that felt robbed by the unfairness of it all. That he would find Tango now, that all of their stars would line up, only to have a few breathless hours of his company before everything turned upside-down made him wonder if the powers that be were crueler than he'd given them credit for, even in his darker moments.

The door to the stationmaster's office banged open, and Tango appeared as if summoned, grinning at Jimmy in the gray dawn light.

"All set up," he told Jimmy. "All that's left is for us to get in position. If our luck holds, the explosions will take them out. If they make it through, I don't see how they'll be able to sneak past us."

Jimmy heaved himself out of the chair, holding onto the sight of Tango's smile, trying to anchor himself with it against the rushing tide of cold dread that he couldn't quite shake. Tango's eyes softened as he approached, and Jimmy thought he could see everything he wasn't saying writ large on Jimmy's face. When he got close enough, Tango tugged at the back of his neck, and Jimmy let himself be pulled until his forehead was resting against

Tango's shoulder. It was an odd mirror of the other night—*Jesus*, how could it have only been the other night that Tango bared his soul to Jimmy?

Jimmy pulled himself back up into a standing position with a deep, shuddering inhale. With a glance at the door—closed—not that it mattered with everyone else but Grian underground—he placed a hand on Tango's cheek and kissed him, softly.

"Thank you," he said, "for staying."

Tango knocked his forehead against Jimmy's, his smile a little more melancholy than it had been. Jimmy wondered if Tango was reeling with the unfairness of it all, too. Tango had had no reason to stay after Grian's confession, could have washed his hands of all of them and let both of his problems wipe each other out. The thought made Jimmy's chest ache.

"Nowhere else I'd rather be," Tango said, and Jimmy couldn't doubt the sincerity of it.

Still, he huffed a laugh as he pulled back. "I can think of at least five other places I'd like to be right now," he admitted.

Tango wasn't wearing his handkerchief around his neck—he hadn't for days, Jimmy realized all at once—and Jimmy took the opportunity to run his thumb over the scar where Pearl's bullet had landed. Tango shivered under his fingers, and it *almost* made Jimmy smile. Almost, but... There was something different about Tango, he thought, something he couldn't quite catch, because he wasn't as familiar with the feel of Tango's skin under his hands as he wanted to be.

"You're stalling, Jimmy," Tango said, his voice gentle, but firm. He turned, pulling out from under Jimmy's hand and went to the door.

Jimmy sucked in a breath.

"Tango—" he said, awe coloring his words. "Your burn—"

Tango half turned back to Jimmy, reaching for his neck, and Jimmy saw the moment that he felt what Jimmy had. The confusion dropped from his face, leaving behind a blank look of pure shock.

Nearly faster than Jimmy could see, Tango's hands dipped to his sides and he unsheathed the sickles, pulling them up and angling them to use as mirrors.

For a few, endless moments, there was silence.

Then the sound of ringing metal as the sickles hit the ground and Tango stumbled to the wall and let it guide him to the floor.

"Tango?" Jimmy rushed over, reaching for Tango, who gripped his hands tight enough that Jimmy could feel his bones creak. There was soot beneath his nails and in his hair, and his eyes were glowing a little, a deep orange in the middle as he stared at Jimmy and then back down at the sickles.

“Oh,” Tango said, his voice a weak warble, “oh, Jimmy, I think I’m a lot more scared than I was a minute ago.”

Confused, Jimmy curls his hands around Tango’s and waits, not sure how to articulate how much he doesn’t understand.

“Pearl—I think—Pearl had a little extra juice after she stabilized Grian, and I think we both thought I was worse off than I was because she went to heal me. I didn’t think much of it at the time, but…” he trailed off, something awful in his eyes, something like hope. “Jim, I think I’m mostly human again.”

Tango had whispered worries into the crook of Jimmy’s neck, the pair of them tangled up together in the spare bed at the Ratcliffe homestead, that whatever had made him human had been stripped away in Hell, that he was worse off than a ghost, doomed to wander the earth in fear, that he wasn’t *really* alive at all—

There was a feverish glint to Tango’s eyes when he looked at Jimmy again. He untangled their fingers and reached up with a trembling hand to touch the scar on his neck.

“I think she just saved my hide.”

Fear clogged Jimmy’s throat—it seemed like since he’d finally stopped holding it at bay, it was *all* he could feel—and he let himself clutch Tango’s hand a moment longer.

“Go now,” he said, low enough that his voice wouldn’t shake. He was suddenly, painfully aware that they’d blocked off all roads out of town. “Head to the mines. Or—or take a horse and follow the tracks. Whatever happens here—”

“No.” Tango said, finally looking at Jimmy like he’d lost his mind. Jimmy was sure he was looking at Tango the same. “God above, are you *serious*? No—”

“*Tango*,” Jimmy interrupted, his voice thick, “You’ve got a proper chance, now, I can’t ask you to throw that away on shit odds like these.”

Tango stared at him for a minute, and Jimmy felt his heart splinter. He tried to memorize Tango’s face, tried to remember what it felt like when the slope of his nose pressed against Jimmy’s cheek. He tried to find a comparison in his memory for the shade of Tango’s eyes, so he could hold onto it as tightly as possible. He tried to remember the weight of Tango’s mouth against his own—

Tango helped him with that. He leaned forward and kissed Jimmy again, hard, determined, like he was trying to memorize Jimmy right back. He didn’t go far when he pulled away, just enough that he could look Jimmy in the eyes again. The curve of his smile was all teeth, and the blaze in his eyes was nearly feral.

“Too bad for you, I’ve got a gambling problem.” Tango said, and Jimmy felt love and grief burst in his chest. He laughed a little, feeling mad, because what else could he do? “Now come on, we’ve got a job to do and a couple’a nightmares to kill.”

He pulled Tango to his feet and stepped aside as he picked up his sickles again.

Together, under a gray-green sky, they walked to the church.

~

The noonday sun saw Jimmy twisting a spyglass in his hands, a relic of their time at sea, feeling for all the world like he'd missed something.

"Maybe we were wrong," he said to Tango, hopeful. "Maybe Martyn won't come back. They'd have been here by now, wouldn't they?"

The floor creaked under Tango's feet as he came to join Jimmy at the window. Jimmy shuddered at the noise. He knew, logistically, that having eyes in the sky was a *good* idea. He just wanted to talk to whoever had designed the town and ask why they'd gone and made the church steeple the tallest building around. It crowded him.

The wind through the open window whispered to him, warnings and secrets that Jimmy, frankly, didn't want to hear. He wished he could tell Del Sombra that if he was going to be hearing voices, he preferred that they *not* tell him morbid things, thank you.

Jimmy could see their home in the distance, a blip of a house, and if he squinted in the other direction, he could see the mine. It looked empty from here. Good.

He squinted again and lifted his spyglass to follow the railroad. In the distance he *thought* he could see clouds of dust—a train, perhaps. His stomach twisted.

It couldn't be a train, he reminded himself. He'd messaged every station that sent carriages their way to warn about the 'rockslide.'

Maybe Cleo had been right, he thought, looking up at the sky, maybe it was a tornado.

Before he could pull Tango over for a confirmation, he heard the man swear beside him.

"What's he *doing*?" Tango demanded.

Jimmy's stomach dropped. He turned the spyglass to where he'd last seen Grian, entering the sheriff's office and froze.

Grian was out in the open, for anyone to see, which was bad enough. Worse still, he had his eyes on the ground as he turned in a slow circle. The tip of his sword followed his movement, scarring the road without seemingly any effort on Grian's part. He turned and seemed to lock eyes with Jimmy for a moment. He smiled sadly and waved at the tower, though Jimmy knew there was nothing to give his position away. The green clouds that had been gathering had blocked out most of the sun, casting the already-shadowy region into relative darkness.

He made the mistake of looking at Grian again, and immediately wished that he hadn't.

He was standing still in the circle he'd made, his hand outstretched towards the sheriff's office. His lips were moving, but from here, Jimmy couldn't hear what he was saying.

The same twisting shadows that Jimmy had seen in Grian's bedroom reached back. He watched them solidify and take shape. First the fingers, then the arm, then it seemed the shape of a woman stepped out from behind some curtain that Jimmy couldn't quite see.

Del Sombra took Grian's hand. It would have almost looked like they were preparing a dance, if it weren't for the way that Grian's whole body shuddered at the touch.

Jimmy watched on in horror, knowing full well that he wouldn't be able to get there in time—and even if he *did*, Grian wouldn't stop—as Grian's body seemed to shatter before Jimmy's eyes.

It started small enough that Jimmy almost didn't recognize what was happening from this distance. As the shadows of Del Sombra curled around Grian's arm and up to his shoulders, Grian seemed to shift his stance, squaring his shoulders—

Except he didn't.

Grian didn't move.

Jimmy raised the spyglass to his eye for a better look and wished he hadn't.

“Oh God,” he said, not sure if he was invoking the deity, or cursing Him.

With the aid of the spyglass, Jimmy could see the muscles and bones moving under Grian's skin, shifting apart and fusing back together in a new formation. In a haunting, horrifyingly familiar turn of events, Jimmy watched as something seemed to slice through the skin of Grian's back and blood began to pour from the wound, turning his shirt red. A moment later, the fabric rose and tore as *something* shoved through. Briefly, it looked like the armature that Cleo used to make dolls for the children, skeletal, with bits of flesh still hanging off it, and Jimmy...

Jimmy realized he was waiting for another one.

He'd been the one to dispose of the bloodstained clothes that Grian had been wearing, and at first, he'd wondered what sort of duel Martyn and Grian had *had* that Martyn had taken shots not once, but *twice* at Grian's back.

It had made him too nauseous and miserable to think about, but now Jimmy thought that he understood what had *really* happened.

Still, the second wing never came.

Grian stumbled, and it took Jimmy a moment to realize it was because his legs could no longer support him. Thanks to the cut of his trousers, Jimmy couldn't see it happening, but seeing the effect as Grian's legs and spine lengthened was still horrifying enough. His bones ached in sympathy.

Del Sombra turned, faceless, towards Jimmy, and she nodded at him.

He cannot feel it, she said, her voice sliding into Jimmy's ears.

He didn't know how to tell her that that didn't make this any better.

He didn't have to, though, because the shadows finished encasing Grian, hiding him from view. The skeletal wing stretched and flexed beneath new feathers of smoking shadow, and when Grian stood back up, leaning on the sword the way Scar sometimes needed to lean on his cane, Grian was far taller than he should have been.

The featureless face turned to Jimmy.

And Grian opened his eyes.

Jimmy didn't know what sound he made before he managed to block it with the back of his hand, but Tango was at his side in an instant.

Outside, the wind began to scream.

Sorry, Tim, came an echoing voice in his mind, half Del Sombra's choral cadence, and half Grian, sounding rueful.

Around him, the cicadas started screaming.

Jimmy felt a chill travel backwards up his spine, sending his skin crawling, and the horror in his chest lodged there. He forced himself to steady and stood at the window again. He cast about wildly with the spyglass, looking for any sign of life that wasn't one of *them*.

The road into town answered for him.

Tango had explained that the traps they set were meant to be flashy, a warning system and deterrent, if possible; and flashy they were.

Small explosions littered the road, flashing green smoke, yellow flames, and sending red canyon dirt high into the air. He swallowed, suddenly afraid.

"Did you—"

"I've never once caused a rockslide," Tango said. If he was offended by Jimmy's question, it didn't show. Still, Jimmy eyed the cliff face nearby warily.

"No rockslides," said a smooth voice behind them, "but plenty of other trouble."

Jimmy dropped the spyglass out of the window and spun. He hadn't heard anyone come up the stairs. He hadn't even heard the ancient doors open below them. He spun to look at the intruder, wondering where in the hell the whispering voices were *now*, as he stared into a pair of mismatched eyes.

"Hey, Etho," Tango said, quietly. He sounded like a man who'd made peace with himself. Jimmy *really* didn't like that. "Can't say I'm surprised to see you here. *Well*, maybe *here*," he gestured around the empty church, its gutted insides having been salvaged to help build and repair other buildings in Del Sombra. The rest of it still stood, yet. It had always unnerved

Jimmy, knowing that it was as grand as ever on the outside, but hollowed out, all the good meat stripped away from bones, left to bleach and crumble under the sun.

That hollowness seemed to echo in Etho's face.

"What are you doing, man?" Etho asked, ignoring Tango's attempt at banter. "Why'd you have to go and run?" He had a gun out—a peacemaker, it looked like—but the hammer was down, and it was pointed at the ground. Etho looked a bit like he didn't have the energy to raise it.

He sure didn't look like the sort of man who dragged people to Hell at the end of their contracts. He just looked... tired.

Tango seemed to search for words for a minute, his hands fluttering before he settled on, "Bettermost wasn't a team. It was Skizz and I, and you and 'Dubs. It'll always be you and Bdubs, and I knew I'd be next if something went wrong." Tango sounded like he was pleading, begging Etho to understand. Jimmy felt his heart break at the sound. He started away from the window and froze.

Behind Jimmy, a howl cut through the town, slicing through the sound of the wind picking up. He could smell gunpowder and smoke, even from here. It clawed at Jimmy's ears, at his muscles, locking them in place. Fear, primal and overpowering, froze him in place.

He cast his eye over the horizon and saw the moment that a figure sliced through the smoke, cutting through it with a purposeful stride.

It was Martyn.

Jimmy knew him on a level that spoke only to instinct. There was nothing left of Martyn in the body that made its way to Grian, all red limned darkness. There was no comfort in the sight of him, where there was comfort in the shadow of Del Sombra. Where there ought to have been features, there was only faceless void, softly curving toward light at the edges.

He stood nearly as tall as Grian, the suggestion of arms and legs in the void-space the only indication that the figure had ever been human. Jimmy felt a bit like he was looking at a photograph that had had a bit cut out of it, and his mind was desperately racing to fill in the space and tell him what he was looking at.

There was a circle of light in the middle of his chest, glowing red as an ember, that branched out along his limbs and pulsed with light every time Martyn's feet hit the ground.

One of those not-arms curled toward his chest, having clearly forgotten that Martyn ever had such a thing as joints or bones. Jimmy's head ached as he tried to understand what he was seeing and Martyn created, seemingly from nothing, a large axe. It looked distressingly similar to the sword that Grian held.

A step behind Martyn was another figure, one that Jimmy had only context clues to name. He'd never met Ren, knew his face only from the wanted poster that hung on the wall of the sheriff's station.

Not that either would have helped Jimmy recognize him, now. To Jimmy, he looked as though someone had taken the pelt of a wolf and stitched it over top of a man. His legs, as he walked, looked *wrong*, as though he were forcing himself to walk on two legs despite no longer being a creature made for it.

Jimmy couldn't see his eyes from here, but he would bet good money that he knew the way that Ren's teeth were bared, the way his pupils were pinpricks of fear and hate in his eyes. He'd seen enough animals in pain on their travels, caught in traps or starving to death in the desert as they approached the camp to attack. Ren, the baddest bandit in the west, looked like nothing more than an animal in pain, right now.

It made a surprising shock of sympathy run through Jimmy. It also meant he knew just how dangerous Ren would be. Hell hath no fury like an animal just trying to survive.

"Ren and Martyn killed Skizz, Etho," Tango said, grief pulling the words from somewhere deep in his chest. The sound of it pulled Jimmy back into the room. His focus snapped into place, and he turned back to the threat in the room. He had to trust Grian to hold the line. "Just like that." Tango snapped his fingers, a demonstration of Martyn's quick temper. Jimmy didn't think it would help for him to chime in on how accurate that was.

Out, out, get out— The cicadas seemed to hiss. It wasn't Del Sombra's voice, but it was probably as close as Jimmy was going to get while she and Grian were occupied. Jimmy couldn't help but agree. Things had taken a turn, they needed to get outside—

"Yeah," Etho said, pulling himself up to his full height. He must have gotten caught up in the explosions, somehow. The smell of smoke hung in Jimmy's nose. "Yeah, he did kill Skizz. But let's be honest here, Tango, Skizz wasn't like you or me. He was never going to make it far."

"We're not—"

"And it's not just Bdubs and I," Etho said, raising his voice over Tango's. His fingers tightened on the gun, and the first spark of something other than misery poked through. His red eye blazed as he stared at Tango. "He's gone, Tango. He's—he's *gone*."

Tango drew in a sharp breath, rocking onto his back foot. The shock of Etho's words seemed to hit Tango like a physical blow. Etho laughed once, the sound as far from humor as Jimmy thought a man could get and still survive it.

"That *thing* down there killed him," Etho spat, waving the Peacemaker in the vague direction of the confrontation outside. And there it was again. The spark lit, burning away Etho's apparent lethargy. Jimmy couldn't see the lower half of his face, but if it was filled with half as much rage and hate as Etho's eyes were, he didn't *want* to see it. He *wanted* to get between Tango and Etho. Now.

"Tango, we have to get out of here." Jimmy said over the cacophony of cicadas. Over the howl of the wind and the sudden sounds of fighting outside. He heard the discordant crash of metal against metal and felt the wrongness of the sound grate against his bones.

Etho took another step toward them, blocking the stairway entirely. His voice, when he spoke again, was just loud enough to be heard. “And I’m going to make sure that no one here makes it out alive.”

Jimmy’s eyes started to sting.

“Tango!” Jimmy shouted, over the sound of the wind and the screams and the fear in his chest.

“Jimmy?” Tango looked over at him, as if only now remembering that he was there.

“I’m sorry about your friend, Tango.” Etho said, soft again. Jimmy ignored the words, ignored Tango trying to decipher them, and just gripped the back of Tango’s vest and tried to run.

He made it two steps before the wood beneath his feet shattered.

The floor rose up to meet him.

He landed hard.

His shoulder cracked sharply against the wooden boards of the floor below. He felt something in his chest give, and something else snap. He wheezed, shocked for a moment, before the pain flooded him and pulled the air from his lungs.

His ears were ringing as pain spread like liquid fire down his chest and choked him.

“Tango?” he wheezed, glad to see, at least, that Tango hadn’t fallen with him. He couldn’t see him through the hole he’d fallen through, either though.

He staggered to his feet and thanked his stars that he didn’t go through the floor a second time.

He blinked, dizzy, and tried to get the spots to leave his vision.

They didn’t.

They *couldn’t*.

The pulpit was burning, flames danced along the walls, catching remnants of lace and curtains, and anything that had been left behind in expectance of another preacher coming forward to take over. The pews may have been stripped for wood, and the sacrament wine taken to the Saloon, but everything else had been left behind.

And now it was all burning.

“Jim?” Tango called, his voice panicked but barely audible over the crackling of the flames, “Jimmy!”

Jimmy shook his head, trying to clear it. He couldn't pull in enough of a breath to call back that he was okay, so instead he moved toward the stairs, merrily burning away.

It seemed stupid, part of him thought, to head *toward* the fire, but a roar and a crash outside told him that leaving might be just as dangerous.

A body hit the foot of the stairs the same moment that Jimmy did, and he found himself with an armful of Tango. He tried to pat down the flames, to keep them from burning Tango any more than he already was. He tangled his fingers in the charred remnants of Tango's vest, more than grateful that Tango was safe.

"This way," he croaked, though it hurt to breathe enough to form words. He could feel something in his chest pressing down painfully every time he inhaled. A rib, he thought.

He turned to pull Tango with him.

A bullet hit the ground in front of them.

"I said," Etho growled, standing at the top of the stairs, "everybody dies here."

Despite the pain, Jimmy pulled Tango as close as he could. Jimmy's eyes burned from the smoke. He was sure Tango and Etho weren't faring much better. Jimmy could feel the encroaching flames stinging his back. He thanked some more stars that they'd ripped the pews loose, else Jimmy was sure he'd already be toasted by now.

The side of the church rumbled as something hit it. Something *huge*, by the sound of it. The wood groaned. The sound of wood cracking dangerously almost overshadowed the sound of the fire around them.

Etho wobbled, not as securely balanced as he clearly thought he was.

Jimmy looked at Tango, whose jaw was clenched tight, even as he cast about for a way out of here. Tango, who hadn't left when he had a chance. Tango, who kept choosing Jimmy, whether he meant to or not. Tango, who saw Jimmy's weaknesses as strengths and saw him in ways no one else had ever taken the time to.

Etho wanted them all to die here? Wanted *Tango* to die here?

Not a chance in Hell.

Jimmy shoved Tango away from himself, away from the flames.

The handle of his gun was already warm, and he didn't think aiming had ever been easier.

He saw Etho reel back from the impact, saw him stumble, watched him fall.

Relief sunk into his bones, sickening and sweet, as Jimmy reholstered his gun. He stumbled back, trying to see Tango through the smoke. He inhaled as best he could, trying to find enough breath in his lungs to call out.

Something hit him at full speed, reintroducing him to the floor of the church. Whatever had shifted earlier cracked in earnest. His vision went black from the pain and he flailed blindly, trying to land a blow. Any blow. His elbow made stinging contact, and he heard a muffled cry of pain. He managed to turn onto his back, so he could see his assailant.

Etho glared down at him, his neckerchief knocked loose from Jimmy's blow. His silver hair hung lank around his face, reflecting the oranges and yellows of the flames around them.

Blood dripped down his face and onto Jimmy's from where Jimmy had hit him. Blood pooled against Jimmy's chest, too, from where the bullet had found a home.

"I was going to let you die nicely," Etho growled, "but you've gone and pissed me off." Etho gripped Jimmy by the shirtfront and reared back.

The first punch had Jimmy seeing stars.

The second never landed.

Etho shouted in pain, and it took Jimmy a minute to blink away enough smoke, blood, and tears to see that Tango had a fistful of his hair. A blade glowed at Etho's throat.

"I'd've been happy to stay," Tango said, voice thick, "If I thought I could trust you not to kill me for him." Tango's voice wobbled in the air around them. To Jimmy's surprise, Etho tilted his head, knocking his forehead gently against Tango's cheek. A thin slice of blood appeared above the blade, dripping down to join the hole in Etho's chest. Tango returned the small gesture, hiding his face in Etho's hair, for just a moment. "Say hello to Bdubs for me," he said, halfway to a sob.

Sharp enough to cut souls, the echo of Del Sombra told Jimmy.

Etho's body slid sideways in Tango's grip. Jimmy's head was starting to spin. He reached up, ignoring the spike of pain in his shoulder, and wiped away one of the tears that had fallen to Tango's cheek.

"Shit," Tango said. Jimmy's world tilted dangerously, and he felt the floor leave his back. He tried to get it back under his feet, but his boots slipped, and his legs didn't want to obey him. He helped what little he could, though, as Tango pulled them from the church.

Jimmy gasped as fresh air smacked him back to consciousness. Rain pelted down on him as well, all but drenching him. He shivered as the excess heat leeches from his skin. The rest of his energy left him in a rush. Tango swore, long and at length, as he fought to keep them from tumbling to the ground.

Jimmy's eyes were clearly failing him.

He'd thought that being this near tornadoes was as good as a death sentence. He could see not one, but two, closing in on the edge of town, a cacophony of noise and wind and encroaching death, but they seemed to hit a point at the edge of town and simply stopped. The whipping of the wind drew them closer together, tying them into a Gordian knot of horror. Jimmy

watched, fascinated as the two tornadoes joined and seemed to walk around the outside perimeter of the town, as if searching for a way in.

Another thunderous crash rumbled beneath his boots like an earthquake, and a flash of wiry fur and enraged eyes slammed into the front of the church again. Ren howled as some of the lashing flames singed his fur, but he forced himself upright and launched himself back toward Grian and Martyn.

Trying to watch Grian fight Ren and Martyn was an exercise in losing what remained of his consciousness. The trio clashed in an amalgamation of limbs and noise.

Ren's teeth shone like moonlight off the Thames as he bit into Grian's wing. Grian screamed, the sound hideous and painful. Around them, the cicadas echoed the sound. Jimmy tried to move out of the circle of Tango's supporting arms, wanting to go to his brother, but Tango kept him close, pulling him away from the burning building, away from the fight.

Ren kept his jaw clenched, his claws buried into the shadow at Grian's back as Martyn lashed out with his axe. Grian tried to dodge the blow, leaning as far against Ren as he could, but the blade passed across the lower half of Grian's face, slicing through the shadows like a lamp in the dark.

Grian stumbled, but managed to block the next blow, even as what passed for blood poured from the wound.

"Jimmy, c'mon—" Tango grunted, still trying to drag Jimmy as far away as he could.

He caught a swimming thought, a strand of memory—*I am the beasts that feast upon them*—and felt a shock of cold as the sky opened and it began to rain. Grian turned to him, blue eyes shining through the fog and the dirt and the terror to look at Jimmy. Jimmy looked back, desperate, hopeful.

"Are you, or aren't you?" Jimmy demanded of his brother, not entirely sure what he was asking—was Del Sombra all she claimed to be? Or was Grian really committed to righting the wrongs he'd stumbled into? His voice was claimed by the screech of the storm around them, he was sure that not even Tango had heard the words, but Grian seemed to.

In a gesture so familiar Jimmy thought they may as well be at home playing cards after dinner, Grian reached up and covered where his mouth ought to be. As he dragged his shadow-fingers through the viscous fluid that passed for blood when he was in this form, Jimmy caught the barest hint of ivory.

And Grian turned back to Martyn, jaw barely hinged, with teeth as sharp as a hungry coyote, their sharpness whet with Martyn's axe and his own blood. The noise that he made was nothing like how Del Sombra had sounded when she spoke to Jimmy. Behind Jimmy, Tango stilled. Even Jimmy looked at the ground, instinctively, as the hiss of a hundred rattlers spilled from between those teeth.

Ren let go of Grian's wing, his ears flattening to his head as he backed away, to Martyn's side. Martyn seemed to realize that all he'd done was simultaneously make Grian angry *and*

give him another weapon.

“Jimmy, bud,” Tango said, sounding panicked. He seemed to have realized that there was no immediate danger of being beset upon by snakes, if the way he guided Jimmy to the ground was any indication. “You have to talk to me. Are you bleeding, or is that all Etho’s?”

Jimmy was pretty sure it was all Etho’s. He tried to say as much, but all that came out was a cough. He settled for shaking his head instead. Tango didn’t seem to understand.

“Can’t—” he croaked, “can’t move my left arm.”

Whatever had cracked when Etho tackled him to the ground had shoved his shoulder out of its socket, and despite his instincts screaming at him to try and move it, to roll it back into place, Jimmy held the limb carefully still.

He felt warm, probably too warm. Heat radiated out from the points where the pain was sharpest. The rain on his face and the wet earth at his back were blissfully cool in comparison.

“Jimmy!” someone shrieked. He tried to crane his neck to look at the newcomer and got a face full of mud for his trouble as Pearl slid over to them. She wasn’t wearing the dress that they’d left her in, and if he wasn’t mistaken, he recognized those sharp blue pinstriped trousers as something Scott had been wearing. She had a belt cinched tight around her waist in conjunction with the suspenders Scott had been wearing to make sure that they fit her properly.

He glared at her half-heartedly. He cleared his throat again, and managed to rasp out, “you’re supposed to be in the mines.” She glanced at him, then to Grian.

“Not a fucking chance,” she said, wiping the mud and blood off of Jimmy’s face. He felt some of the sharp, stabbing pain subside, and found that he could take in a full breath again. His chest still crackled when he did so, but he no longer felt that he had to worry about his rib puncturing anything important.

“God, Grian,” she whispered, “I never actually saw...” she trailed off, her eyes locked on the fight. Jimmy twisted, too, though Tango refused to let him get far, his hands still searching for any places he’d been hit too hard, never mind that he’d just watched Pearl fix some of his injuries.

Grian hadn’t given any ground, still standing in the circle he’d drawn in the road, but it wasn’t looking good. Shadowy hands clung to his legs, pulling up from the ground and leaving an eerie circle of light around him as he fought to stay in place. Ren was bleeding, leaking that same star-silver as his teeth wherever Grian’s sword had made contact. Jimmy could hardly tell what was happening. His brain kept trying to let go of it, to let it flow past him. *Not for your eyes*, it tried to tell him, but he forced himself to see. Forced himself to make sense of the mass of shadows, the flashes of light-bright teeth.

Grian stumbled, howling that awful scream again as, this time, Ren succeeded in tearing the wing from his back.

“Not getting away this time,” Martyn said, his voice a melody in reverse.

It wasn't just the cicadas screaming with him, Jimmy thought. It was the *town*. Jimmy pressed his fingertips into the mud and dirt beneath his palms and tried to pat at the earth, a mimicry of a soothing gesture. It didn't work.

Grian's wing melted in Ren's mouth, a pool of black, brackish blood that stained the maw of whatever Ren had become. Martyn hacked at the shadows around Grian's legs, trying to uproot him, trying to force him back outside of the circle of ground Grian had decided was his standing point. The earth bloomed black as the shadows were sliced away. Smoky tendrils reached out for the hands, trying to pull them back to Grian, trying to reform—

Grian stumbled. Ren had hit him again, rushing to the side where the shadowy anchor had yet to reform, and nearly knocked him down in one blow.

Jimmy swore and clawed himself back to his feet. He swayed a little, until Pearl and Tango got their hands on him.

“We have to get one of them off of him,” he said, not sure if he was speaking clearly at all. His left arm was out—he'd be lucky if he could reach his holster, let alone shoot. He went for his other gun and aimed.

The barely-discernable mass of what Jimmy knew to be bodies, if barely, seemed to blur and warp as he watched. His hand shook.

“Pearl,” he said, and passed his gun over. She checked it, confused. Her head snapped up to look at him when she realized what he meant.

“I'm not good with these,” she said, quickly, “The recoil on them is completely different than my rifle—”

“We ain't got shooting sticks,” Tango said, ducking out from Jimmy's other side the second he was sure that Jimmy could stand on his own, “but this'll do in a pinch.”

Tango levered Pearl's arm up to rest on his shoulder, crouching a little so that her arm was level.

“Tango,” she hissed, horrified, but his hand on her arm kept it in place.

He raised an eyebrow at her, “this is what I'd call a pinch. What's a little muzzle blast between friends?”

Pearl, to her credit, didn't hesitate further, even as her lips pinched at the corners, and her eyebrows turned down.

The first bullet went wide as she got used to the feel of the gun in her hands, but she settled her stance and fired again.

A hole punched through Ren's lupine form, leaving behind a pinprick of light. He staggered and turned to them with a snarl. He dropped onto all fours, looking for all the world like

nothing more than a giant black wolf. Albeit one with luminous eyes and teeth that shone even through the brackish blood soaking his muzzle.

“Again,” Jimmy wheezed as Ren began to lope towards them, “Pearl—”

Another scream rent the air, a high screeching whistle, and the world seemed to stop as Jimmy turned and watched a train pull into the station. Ren paused in his approach, turning to the noise with fangs bared.

A man dropped to the platform before the train had even stopped moving. He steadied himself with the cane in his hand.

He brushed off his lapels as he walked, but his eyes were fixed on the inhuman trio.

Jimmy had never seen Scar angry before. He’d seen him irritated, seen him hiding abject terror once, when Jellie ate something she wasn’t supposed to, but Jimmy had never seen Scar *angry*.

And now he was livid.

Ren turned away from the three of them properly. Pearl fired off another shot, making Tango wince, but even that pinging off of Ren’s hide wasn’t enough to distract him from the new enemy.

“You’re not welcome here,” Scar said, his voice rising over the scream of the wind, the hiss of the rain, to ring clear and true through the air. His cane hit the earth as he walked, punctuating his words. Shadows rushed to meet him, reaching for him, to cushion his feet and ease his trek through the mud.

Jimmy could *feel* Del Sombra breathe a sigh of relief.

Her sheriff had come home.

Ren paced a line between Scar and Grian, effectively separating them, a wordless taunt. *It’s over; you’ll never reach him.*

Scar answered the taunt with a grin.

Ren lunged.

With a form that any self-respecting cricketer would strive for, Scar slid his cane up in his hand and met Ren halfway.

The head of the cane hit Ren’s skull with a crack. Instead of the silver that had been spilling from his wounds when Grian hit him, this attack seemed to burn. Red and orange fissures appeared like bruising along the side of Ren’s face, and when the wound bled, it bled the same red as Etho. The same as Jimmy.

“Wh—Pearl! Hey!” Tango shouted.

Jimmy spun, a moment too late, and had to turn again.

Tango was holding Jimmy's gun, looking properly gobsmacked.

Pearl cut through the rain and the shadows on sure feet, beelining directly for Martyn. In each hand, she gripped one of Tango's sickles, shining brighter than the full moon on a clear night.

"Pearl!"

The word was stolen straight from his throat by a voice Jimmy had thought he'd never hear again.

"Criminy, *slow down*—" called someone else, a voice he didn't recognize at all.

It was instinct that drove Jimmy forward. He shoved away from Tango on shaky knees and caught his eldest sister around the waist before she could sprint into the fray. She fought his hold like a woman possessed. His shoulder screamed at the strain, but he held fast. This, he thought, would be so much easier if he could move his left arm.

Lizzie's elbow macked his cheekbone and he felt his head spin a little. He didn't let go, just clutched her tighter, pressing his forehead into her shoulder to try and get the world to slow down.

"Lizzie," he tried, coughed, and tried again, "Lizzie-diz, please—"

Lizzie stopped fighting his hold, turning to look at him with slowly dawning horror on her face.

"Put me down," she demanded. "Dear God, put me down,"

"You can't go over there," he begged, even as he dropped her feet back to the earth with a groan of pain. His shoulder clicked as she stepped away and he tried to keep the worst of the pain off his face as she turned back to him. Judging by the horror in her expression, he wasn't sure he succeeded.

"Jimmy?" she asked, horrified. "Are you all right?" Before he could answer with an answer that was only partially untrue, she glanced over her shoulder, back to the fight, "what—what's happening? What the hell is *that*? Where's Grian?"

Jimmy couldn't help the way his eyes slid over to where Pearl had rushed off to. Grian had stood again. Something about Scar's return seemed to have given him a second wind. Part of him figured that if Del Sombra was relieved about his presence, then Grian must have been just as ecstatic. He still didn't look good, the shadows around him moved sluggishly, and his reaction times were slowing, but he didn't need to be fast for long.

"Grian's... here," he said slowly.

Pearl slid to a halt behind Grian, once again kicking up mud and rainwater in the pursuit of stopping her momentum and wrapped her arms around him. The pair of them skidded backwards, cushioned by a rising tide of shadows as she raised the sickles to block a blow

Martyn sent their way. The shadows surged, engulfing them both for a moment, and when they abated, Pearl had vanished, but Grian stood taller.

He pushed forward, beyond the bounds of his circle. He sent attack after attack towards Martyn, his sword landing glancing blows whenever they weren't blocked in time. Grian hit Martyn's wrist with the flat of his blade, and before he could recover, Grian reeled back and slashed upward, a perfect mimicry of the cut that Martyn had sent across Grian's face earlier.

Martyn's face, which had been nothing but sucking, all-encompassing void before, now shone with the light of a thousand red stars that spilled from the wound like tears.

Grian shrieked, a triumphant cry that sounded more vulture than man, and leapt for Martyn. Those coyote teeth sunk into the space where Martyn's shoulder should have been.

Jimmy's eyes scanned past the flashing of blades and bodies that his brain refused to comprehend, searching for Pearl.

"Jimmy," Lizzie prodded, "Here *where*?"

"He's fighting Martyn." Jimmy said slowly.

Lizzie was smart, she'd always been smart, and Jimmy could feel it the second she understood what he was saying. Jimmy had a hunch that she'd recognized Grian, the way that Jimmy had known Martyn, but hadn't wanted to believe it until now.

"Oh *god*," she cried, "what? *That's* Grian? *That's* Martyn?"

"I'm still trying to wrap my head around it, too," Jimmy said, aiming for soothing and missing by a mile. "Tango, do you have—" he began, but stopped as the ground rumbled beneath his feet.

"Get," Scar snarled, his voice echoing in time with the cicadas, "*out*."

The ground rumbled as Scar landed another blow, and another, on Ren. Then, against all reason, it split open, a great, cavernous maw that tore the ground apart, right down the middle of the street. The fissure cleanly separated the smoldering remains of the church from Scar's home, the station from the last farm before town, and Ren from the group of mortals huddled in the rain.

The ground pitched, and Jimmy caught the smell of sulfur and heard the hiss of the rain on impossible heat.

Jimmy glanced back, relieved to see that Grian's feet were steady on the ground, even as it rocked beneath them, thanks to the shadowy tendrils that anchored him, but Martyn stumbled, trying to shove past him.

Trying to get to Ren.

"No!" Martyn shrieked, the sound of it enough to make Jimmy feel like his ears were bleeding.

He didn't get far.

The same whiplike shadows that anchored Grian lashed out, reaching for Martyn, and pulled him back to where he had been.

Jimmy didn't pay them any more mind.

This time, he *was* thinking as he picked up Lizzie under one arm and, despite the pain that burned through him at the movement, turned to pull Tango as far from the hole in the ground as he physically could. Tango clung to him, his nails digging into the meat of Jimmy's arm as he held on for dear life. *Very* dear.

"Ren!" Martyn howled. And that *was* Martyn's voice. There was no echo of dying stars, no whispering voices, like when Grian spoke in tandem with Del Sombra, there was nothing hollow or otherworldly about it, this time.

It was just the voice of a desperate man, who sounded like he'd realized the price he'd had to pay a moment too late. He sounded as though he'd just lost everything worth living for.

Jimmy's heart cracked, just a little, for the man he'd known.

Despite himself, Jimmy looked around.

Ren scrambled at the edge of the pit that had opened beneath him, but with the half-clawed monstrosities that his hands had turned into, he couldn't get purchase. Scar let his cane slide back into its usual position and simply watched, his face impassive, as Ren fell.

And as Martyn struggled to free himself of Grian's grasp, the shadows behind him shifted.

Pearl stepped back into view, Tango's sickles held in sure hands, little slices of light in the unnatural darkness around her.

Grian gripped Martyn tightly, tendrils coiling around his arms, keeping that axe at bay as unnaturally long fingers lifted Martyn up and turned him to face Pearl.

Jimmy couldn't help but wonder if Grian was getting a little bit of sick satisfaction out of showing Martyn how thoroughly he'd failed.

Martyn fought against them, but Grian didn't budge, and the shadows kept him trapped.

If *Jimmy* had been in Martyn's position, he wouldn't have wanted to face Pearl either.

Her face shone with a desperate fury that Jimmy had only seen painted on angels. She rose both sickles above her head, and in a great arcing swing, she buried them deep in Martyn's chest, right over that pulsing, bleeding light.

Martyn didn't scream, but all sound seemed to leave the valley for a moment, shrouding them all in silence. Jimmy could feel Lizzie yelling in his grip, her voice buzzing against his arm, but Jimmy heard nothing.

The sickles tore through the red-black void that had made up Martyn's torso, the shining silver blades in Pearl's hands glowing almost white in comparison.

The void released Martyn, looking for all the world like grasping hands that had interlocked over and over, finally letting go and releasing the man beneath. The hands couldn't escape the burning of the sickles, though, each of them turning first the red orange of sunset, glowing dangerous and frightening against Grian's palms and Pearl's too-human stature. Even that burning glow fled in the face of those weapons, burning backward and flaking like charred bark from a log, until only a familiar form, a familiar face, remained.

What soul had they cut from that body, Jimmy wondered. Was it Martyn's? Or something else entirely?

Martyn looked down at the sickles, as if surprised to see them there, and slumped, lifeless, out of Grian's grip. He hit the ground as himself, human again.

Still the sickles stuck out of his chest.

The ground tipped back upward and settled beneath their feet.

Scar bent down, picked up his hat, and placed it squarely back on his head.

The shadows began to recede, the sky began to clear, and as light returned to Del Sombra, Pearl fell to her knees.

As if coming to the same consensus at once, Jimmy dropped Tango and Lizzie, and they raced to where the shadows had been.

Jimmy took a page out of Pearl's book and didn't bother trying to stop himself. He dropped to his knees and let his momentum crash him into Pearl. She squawked as they toppled sideways, but Lizzie was there, ready to catch them.

With his good arm, Jimmy reached out to Grian. He was still leaking shadows back into their surroundings. He hovered, looking between the three of them, awe on his face, one too-long arm still clutching his *god damned sword*, while the other seemed to be holding his mouth closed as his body shifted back into itself.

His eyes, for a brief, shining moment, were normal.

Jimmy could have cried at the sight. Whatever Grian had done, whether in pursuit of knowledge, or to save Pearl, had changed him irrevocably, but underneath it all, that was still Jimmy's brother.

The shadows receded, shrinking Grian back down to a normal size. They slid backward under Grian's skin, melting into his veins, and slowly, the blue of Grian's eyes darkened until they were once again as dark as a moonless night.

Del Sombra sank back into regular shadow with an audible sigh of relief.

Hesitant for reasons Jimmy did not care about in the least, Grian reached for Jimmy's outstretched hand.

Jimmy grabbed him and tugged him into the almost-hug. If Jimmy'd had a say, and a second arm that he could use without passing out, he would have *made* it a hug, but sacrifices must be made.

The sword clattered off to the side, where, as far as Jimmy was concerned, it could *stay*.

"Lizzie?" Pearl asked, her voice disbelieving. Jimmy turned in time to see Lizzie shaking out her handkerchief to swipe at the mud and blood splashed across Pearl's features.

"I'm so sorry I'm late," Lizzie said. "We had a devil of a time on the train. Did you know people *actually* blow up entire reserves of black powder so that one train company can claim to be more reliable? It's carnage, I tell you."

Jimmy caught Grian's eye and couldn't hold back a snort of laughter. It was so... *normal*. So mundane. *Sorry I'm late, we had trouble on the train*. Grian giggled, a high, hysterical sound.

"And *you*," Lizzie continued, turning to her twin, her voice promising a fate far worse than murder. "You have *so* much explaining to do. There I am, freshly in mourning for my poor dead husband—"

"Your husband's dead?" Grian said, carefully, "I'm sorry to hear that."

Lizzie leveled him with a look of fond exasperation. "No, you're not," she corrected.

"No, I'm not," Grian agreed easily, "I never liked him, he was a churlish—"

"*And*," Lizzie continued, loud enough to drown out Grian's voice. Jimmy knocked his head against Pearl's shoulder, fighting back half relieved, half hysterical laughter at the familiarity of it, "I come home, expecting to mourn in good company, only to hear that my family has *absconded to America*? Oh, you're in trouble. I'm going to be livid once I'm done being glad you're alive."

"Can't wait," Grian said, dropping his forehead onto Lizzie's shoulder.

And the thing was, Jimmy believed him.

~

Joel had helped pop Jimmy's shoulder back in place by way of introduction, and in exchange, both Lizzie and Jimmy pretended not to hear the harshly whispered exchange between Joel and Tango as the six of them made their way back to the mine. Pearl and Grian were leaning on each other for support, and Scar was walking close enough on Grian's other side that Jimmy didn't bother worrying about his brother. He and Lizzie had reverted to a habitual decorum, walking arm in arm as they pretended not to eavesdrop.

"I swear to you," Joel said, "I'm just here for Lizzie, er, I mean, Elizabeth—Mrs. Blackwood."

Jimmy raised an eyebrow at his sister. She pretended, quite well, not to notice.

“This place is really lovely,” she said, interrupting Jimmy before he could so much as open his mouth. He bit back a smile.

“Yeah,” he agreed, “we love her.”

If Lizzie noticed the strange wording, he was sure it was just another drop in the bucket of strangeness she’d been dumped into today. And as the sun set over them, lending the shadows extra length with which to reach for them all, Jimmy felt like he could breathe more easily than he had in years, even with the broken rib.

Chapter End Notes

Hybbart's Piece! ([Part 1](#)) ([Part 2](#)) ([Part 3](#))

[Foxy's Piece!](#)

:D LOOK AT THEMMMMM!! I can't believe I've had to sit on this art for WEEKS now! I've been so excited to share it, they both did such wonderful pieces!! I will be linking their tumblr posts if/when they post the art as well <3

One more chapter to go! <3 Instead of a double update it might be a two-day-in-a-row update, because my hubris knows no bounds, but given the epilogue quadrupled in length for... reasons... I hope y'all won't mind too much XD

Big thanks as always to the HSBB2023 Mods! And HUGE thanks to my artists!! They're linked above and below, go give them some love! :D

[Hybbart's Tumblr](#)

[Foxyola's Tumblr](#)

EDIT: I can't believe I forgot to leave the translations for the R'lyehian down here slkagilsdkjgl. If y'all want to see the actual breakdowns I can add those too because that took WORK but for now here are the translations, thank you to my partner for the assistance when I kept saying things like "Hey Howard, you loser, why couldn't you be

more like Tolkien in SEVERAL ways?" or "how am I supposed to conjugate this when it's got two vastly different transliterations??" and also "help. please someone help me figure out how to conjugate "watch" into this fake language made up by an asshole"

Pearl's Phrase: C'ai Phfhtagn Haisyha'h, mg'ilyaa syha'h. naflr'luh-eeh Nyarlahotep h'ee. Naflhai h'ee naflph'nglui wgah'nhai f'ph'fhtagn?

Translation: You called them, but lying Nyarlahotep answered your invitation. Why would they act, when they can watch?

Grian's Phrase: C'hai ph'nglui. Fsyha'h ilyaa nalmg'bug Shuggagn.

Translation: Her death, for nothing. They will not come.

You can come find me/yell at me/be emotional with me about the fact that it's nearly finisheddddd on [my tumblr as well!](#)

Epilogue

Chapter Summary

After the fight against Ren and Martyn, Del Sombra settles back into some degree of normalcy, whatever that looks like.

Chapter Notes

The weasels bade me sleep, so posting this today instead of yesterday <3

A couple of things:

Y'all may have noticed that I have made this fic into a series! As emotional as I am to be finishing this fic, it officially won't be the last one in this setting. I can't necessarily promise timelines on the new ones, but they'll be much (much) shorter than this one was! I'm excited about the pots I've got on this particular stove, so hopefully you guys will be too! You can sub to the series if you're interested or come poke me about them on [tumblr](#), if you like!

Also!! Earlier today I got linked two more incredible pieces of fanart!! Go check them out, I love them so much!!!

[AzzayofChaos did a lovely piece based off of the ending of Chapter 7!!](#)

[LeafDoodles did this fabulous Tango piece!!](#)

Go give them some love, I am SOSOSO emotional today, I cried when I saw them both slkgjsldgjl

Also, now that you're here I can assume you've read the last chapter, so: sorry to everyone who thought it was going to be the Watchers/Listeners juicing up Grian and Martyn XD But I am delighted by how much you guys seemed to enjoy the Del Sombra reveal!!

What I wouldn't give for a snapshot of Mr. ITLW's bookshelf. I think we might be pulling from some similar playbooks. I want to see what his lovecraftiana section looks like!! Drop your reelist, sir!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

In the early light of dawn, Jimmy rode toward the sun, his hat down low over his eyes. Behind him, the cart rolled, and with every bump and divot in the road, Jimmy felt his heart grow a little heavier. He almost wished that Grian had wanted to come with him—though he knew that any vestiges of friendship between Grian and Martyn had long since burnt away. He didn't quite want to be doing this by himself, though.

As he passed beyond the bounds of the town, he felt something about the air shift. Del Sombra hadn't spoken to him—or anyone but Grian, near as Jimmy could tell—since Scar had returned, but he was aware of her presence as though she walked beside him. He shuddered at the sudden feeling of isolation, of the cold, unfeeling desert around him. Above him, a hawk screamed and swooped out of sight, in search of some prey that Jimmy couldn't see.

Jimmy rode on.

He could have stopped just beyond the bounds of town, he thought, but something about that felt wrong. Too perfunctory.

Part of him kicked himself for telling Tango he didn't need to come on this particular journey, but it had felt necessary to do this on his own.

He glanced back, remembering when it had been Tango in the back of the cart, the pair of them rambling back to the Ratcliffe homestead. There was no friendly face in the back of the cart, now. No budding acquaintance or burgeoning friendship, here. There was only grief.

Jimmy, if he did say so himself, had gotten very good at grieving Martyn.

The shrouded body in the back of the cart rocked a little as one of the wheels hit a rock, and Jimmy turned back around, focusing on guiding Arrow. He had to find a place to bury Martyn, beyond town limits, since he was no friend or resident of Del Sombra, and for the sake of the man who had once been his friend, who had once been *far more* than a friend, Jimmy was going to make it a good one. Martyn may not have deserved it, after all he'd done, but that wasn't going to stop Jimmy from giving it to him anyway.

He rode for another hour, casting his eye more easily over the horizon as the sun climbed higher. And if a few gut-wrenching sobs broke the silence of the landscape, then that was between him and the desert.

He guided Arrow over a small ridge, and stopped.

Stretching out below him was scrubland, littered with cacti and sagebrush and *colors*.

The flowers burst in yellows and reds and purples, decorating the red-orange dust with so much life that Jimmy thought it might choke him. In the middle of the basin sat a pool of water, barely large enough to be considered a pond, but under the light of the morning it glittered.

Jimmy sat, awestruck for a moment longer, letting the brilliance of the view wash over him, and felt something settle in his chest.

He grabbed the shovel from the back of the cart and picked his way through the landscape, careful not to disturb it overmuch.

At a spot about fifty yards from the water, Jimmy found a clear space where a shrub had been nearly uprooted by a passing storm—he wondered how this whole glade appeared safe and

sound, when the twin tornadoes had devastated the area around Del Sombra—and began to dig.

It was harder than it looked, digging a grave. Sweat poured from his face and his muscles ached by the time he was done. His newly healed shoulder and collarbone throbbed with the exertion. He'd probably have to take it a little easier to avoid reinjuring himself.

He thought of Tango, and the willpower and strength it must have taken to dig not just one, but over a *hundred*. Jimmy couldn't help but be impressed.

Still, the job wasn't done yet.

He stuck the shovel into the dirt and went back to the cart.

Martyn's body was stiff and heavy in his arms, if deceptively warm from the sun overhead. Jimmy didn't force away the memories of times he held Martyn in life, though his instinct to do so was strong. He remembered friendly embraces and sparring matches; remembered stolen moments in hidden corners and a few halcyon nights where Jimmy had once wished that he would get to hold onto Martyn forever.

He let himself remember all of the ways Martyn had ever said his name: delighted, irritated, angry, recalcitrant, *disgusted*—and wished he could have understood the man the way he thought he did. Maybe then he would have been able to get through to him.

Probably not.

He remembered the way that Martyn had called for Ren in Ren's last moments and bit back a wave of emotion.

He knelt carefully beside the hole he'd dug and laid Martyn in it.

"I'm sorry I couldn't bury you together," Jimmy said, and meant it.

The first shovelful of dirt hitting the ground felt like grief.

The second felt like rage.

The rest felt like finality.

He was never going to get to sit down and ask Martyn what he was thinking. He was never going to get to ask if it was worth it, or if he'd ever really cared about Jimmy. He was never going to be able to tell him just how *incandescently* angry he was with him.

It didn't matter, anymore. It *couldn't* matter, anymore.

Jimmy smoothed down the top of the grave with the back of his shovel and ignored how harsh the breeze felt on his face.

"Friend of yours?" came a voice.

Jimmy jumped, scrambling back, away from the grave.

He hadn't even heard the man approach, he'd been so lost in thought.

Then again, Jimmy thought as he cast his eye around the clearing, he didn't see a horse or cart *to* hear. He looked back at the man again as he spoke.

"A long time ago," he said. The man speaking was tall, with a thin face that looked... well, it looked the way Jimmy had seen some early art student's portraits look. The face was clearly proportioned around a certain point, but none of the features seemed to fit together properly. His nose was too thin, his mouth too wide, his eyes looked too large for his face. When he smiled at Jimmy, probably aiming for sympathetic, the whole picture looked like it had been shrunk, or the sides of the face had been drawn too far away from the features.

He looked like the sort of man who didn't much care to *have* a face but had one anyway. When he gestured at the grave, Jimmy got the impression that his arms were too long, but they rested normally at his sides.

"That's a right shame, that is," the stranger said.

"Thank you." Jimmy said, nonplussed. He stepped away, not really wanting to turn his back on the man, "Well, I ought to get going."

"Wouldn't want to be out when it gets dark," the man agreed, nodding. "Never know what sorts of critters might come out to play."

Jimmy didn't rush back to the cart, but he sure didn't dawdle. When he'd tossed his shovel into the back and hauled himself up into the driving seat, he noticed that the man hadn't moved, though he was still watching Jimmy over his shoulder.

At a loss, Jimmy raised his hand in farewell. The stranger waved back.

When Jimmy was well and truly out of sight, he breathed a sigh of relief and turned Arrow's nose toward Del Sombra.

Nyarlathep, the Crawling Chaos, stood at Martyn's grave a while longer, a pout on his meticulously chosen features. "A *right* shame," he repeated, kicking at a pile of loose dirt. He seemed to perk up a bit as a thought crossed his mind and straightened, hooking his thumbs through his belt loops. "Well," he said, grinning towards the setting sun, "there's always next time."

~

Jellie had not stopped purring since the moment Grian had dropped her back in Scar's lap. To be fair, though, Jellie had also not left his person since then.

Once the adrenaline had worn off, Scar had immediately come down with what Cub called a "Karmic Cold" for worrying all of the townsfolk so much. When faced with a sniffly Scar, Jimmy had agreed to continue on as interim sheriff until he got better. Something about the way he'd said it had felt like a very strong hint that he wasn't long for Del Sombra. It wasn't

until he'd mentioned that he'd be back to visit Grian and Pearl that Scar had felt a knot of fear unwind in his gut.

He was finally feeling well enough that the thought of being in bed annoyed him, so he'd draped Jellie around his shoulders and trudged his way into the kitchen, where she purred the entire time he was making coffee.

Del Sombra was quiet again, the rushing sound in his ears no longer a cry for help from long-dormant insects, and instead attributed only to the river that ran behind the town. He didn't know who to thank for that, the triggering of the early warning system that Scar almost remembered asking for, but he did know that Nick must have been laughing uproariously at him, knowing that he was suffering from a splitting headache the moment it started. *Headache clause*, he noted for future reference.

The shadows at his ankles curled around him like a second affectionate cat. He'd have to ask Grian about that, at some point.

A knock at his door had him pausing before he could properly sit down with his coffee and his cat. Irritation was headed off at the pass by the door creaking open a tad and a familiar voice calling inside.

"Soup delivery!"

Scar couldn't help but smile at Pearl as she poked her head inside. She beamed at him.

"Oh good! You're awake," she said. "That means you get to eat this now, and I get to go tell Grian to stop wringing his hands and get out of my hair, already. I think poor Lizzie'll kill him if he doesn't stop being annoying soon."

"Grian?" Scar scoffed, taking the tureen of soup, still warm, from Pearl. "Annoying?"

"You're the only one who doesn't think so," she said, pressing a quick kiss to his cheek. It had been a bit strange at first, the way that the entire family had seemed to simultaneously warm up to him more, and yet act like nothing at all was different. It felt a bit like he'd been a close friend before, but now he was part of the *family*, even to Lizzie, and he didn't know what to do with that.

"Nah," Scar said around the lump in his throat, "he annoys me plenty."

"Difference is you *like* it," she said, sticking her tongue out in an expression of mock-disgust. "Lizzie must have had on some very rose-colored glasses, given how much she claimed to miss us all. I think she's missing being *away* from us, by this point."

Scar thought about Elizabeth Blackwood, and the way that she watched her siblings when they weren't looking. He politely sipped at his soup instead of arguing, though he had a feeling that if anyone would march down into Hell and successfully bring her family back, it was 'poor Lizzie.'

“Fair warning,” Pearl added, after a moment of silence, “Grian’s currently ‘fixing’ your mirrors to make sure that the sun is always at the right height to shine in your eyes.”

“... My height or his height?”

Pearl’s lips twitched. Grian’s height, then. “I couldn’t tell you,” she said simply. “I didn’t stay for the experiment.”

A trip out into his town would do him good, he decided after Pearl had watched him finish the soup, given Jellie a scratch behind the ears, and left.

He didn’t let himself linger over his clothes, though part of him insisted that he dress the part.

There was no part to be played here, he reminded himself. He was just the sheriff of Del Sombra, finally home again.

That didn’t mean he didn’t dress to *impress*.

True to Pearl’s word, Grian was fiddling with the mirror next to the cell when Scar came in. He startled and nearly dropped it when the reflection caught on another one, showing off an infinity of Scars in his hands.

Instead of dropping it, Grian hugged it close to his chest, almost like a shield.

“Well, hello there,” Scar said, unable to stop himself from sounding fond, rather than teasing or chastising. He leaned against his undeniably pristine and organized desk—Jimmy’s influence, he wagered—and grinned at Grian. “Don’t stop on my account.”

Grian huffed but hung the mirror back where it belonged.

“How are you feeling?” Grian asked as he adjusted the frame on the mirror.

“Better,” Scar admitted, “your sister keeps accosting me with soup.”

“She does like soup, our Pearl.”

Silence descended on the small room, almost claustrophobic, if Scar hadn’t known it was coming. If he wasn’t perfectly in control of it. He drummed his fingers on the wood of the desk, pretending to think, and then snapped, like an idea had come to him out of the blue.

“I remembered what I was going to ask you,” he said, triumphantly. Grian looked dubious. He looked downright *afraid*.

First things first, then.

“Did you know?”

“Know what?” Grian asked. It didn’t sound like he was hedging his answer, only that there were several things that he *might* have known that Scar could be asking about.

“You made a deal with me, before I left. Did you know that it would be,” he waved his hand around and made a faint whooshing noise, “*binding*? Because if you didn’t, I won’t hold you to it.” Scar could see Grian biting the inside of his cheek, clearly thinking.

He stepped forward, reaching out to take Grian’s hand. “This isn’t a trick question, G,” Scar said, quietly. “All I get out of it is the answer you give.”

“I’m not worried about you tricking me,” Grian said, the words coming easily but not *quickly*. “I’m worried *I’ve* tricked *you*.”

“What,” Scar scoffed, “with that whole ‘I’m a seven-foot-tall shadow creature’ thing?”

“*Yes*, with that,” Grian huffed. “You say that like it’s not a big deal!”

“You say *that* like you didn’t willingly make a capital-D Deal with a man who might have tried to get your soul out of the matter.” Scar countered.

“You didn’t ask for my soul.”

“Dreadful oversight on my part,” Scar rubbed his thumb across Grian’s knuckles. “We can work on deals and logistics later, then. First, I have follow up question regarding our Deal, since you knew it was binding,” Scar raised an eyebrow, telegraphing that he was going to wait until he got a genuine answer to that question.

Grian made a face at his insistence, but nodded all the same, “It took me a while to figure it out, but you use some very specific language when you’re making a Deal. It’s different than when you talked the rail company into building a stop here. And once I figured that out, I realized I could feel the magic if I focused on it.”

Scar nodded, his heart twisting at the knowledge, at the *confirmation* that Grian had done this because he wanted to, because he knew it would be an extra incentive on Scar to return safely. Something magically binding.

He also knew that, technically, the Deal could be considered complete. He had a feeling that was what was worrying Grian. Scar had taken care of his side of the bargain: he’d come home. Now was the other half, where if, and *only* if, Scar wanted to, he could kiss Grian until he got sick of it.

“Follow-up question, then,” Scar cleared his throat, “would you prefer I kiss you as many times as I want all at *once*, or spread it out over,” Scar hummed, pretending to do the math, “a period of several to hundreds of years? Dependent on how long we live, of course.”

“That one,” Grian said, before Scar had even finished speaking. He turned a little red at the enthusiasm evident in his voice, but Scar didn’t tease him about it.

“And...” Scar trailed off, not wanting to ask this at all, but knowing he wouldn’t rest well until he knew, “will you be staying in Del Sombra long enough for me to cash in?”

Grian looked surprised at the question.

“Scar—” he began, but Scar held up a hand.

“Jimmy’s leaving. You’re free to go home now that Martyn isn’t trying to use you as a human sacrifice,” Scar said, his voice gentler than he’d anticipated. He’d wanted to be factual, cold, but he couldn’t manage it.

“I... I guess I hadn’t thought about it.”

Unfortunately for both of them, it had been *all* that was on Scar’s mind.

“How about this?” he said, not wanting to give Grian time to work himself into a strop over it. He pulled a silver dollar from the pocket of his waistcoat. “We leave it up to fate. Heads, you stay; tails, you go.” He watched for any shift in expression. Grian’s face was carefully, infuriatingly, blank. Scar waited for the scoff. For Grian to demand why he thought that it was okay to decide something so important on the whim of a coin.

“Alright,” Grian said. He held out his hand.

Scar didn’t move.

Grian raised an eyebrow and beckoned for Scar to hand over the coin. “Come on, Scar,” he said, a little exasperated, “my fate, my flip. *And*, because you’re being difficult, heads I go, tails I stay.”

Slowly, Scar exhaled. He passed the coin to Grian, trying to seem like he didn’t care which side it came down on.

He didn’t think he did a terribly good job on that front.

Grian saluted him with the coin and tossed it into the air.

Scar craned his neck, trying to see through Grian’s cupped palms which side the coin had come down on.

Grian sighed.

For a brief moment, Scar’s heart stopped.

Then he caught the slight curve to the corner of Grian’s lips.

“Guess you’re stuck with me, sheriff,” he said, passing the coin back to Scar.

Scar couldn’t help the spring in his step as he stood and walked to Grian. He tucked the coin back in his pocket and stopped fighting the grin threatening to take up space on his face.

“Better make the best of a bad situation,” Scar said, offering Grian his hand. Grian, against all reason, took it.

Scar used the grip to tug Grian against him. He kissed Grian again for the first time since returning, and it felt like he was *finally*, truly home.

“Besides,” Grian said, when they’d broken apart, and Grian was looking at Scar like he never wanted to look anywhere else, “I really don’t think she’d let me leave.”

Scar’s brow furrowed, trying to figure out who Grian meant. Lizzie? Lizzie would have more than enough reason to want Grian to stick in one place for a while. Pearl, maybe? He knew Pearl had made all manner of friends in Del Sombra, “Who?” he asked, when he couldn’t puzzle it out.

The twist of Grian’s mouth went a bit wry, “Ah,” he said, “*about* that—”

~

Tango watched the clouds overhead, passing through the clear blue sky. About a hundred feet away on the other side of the river, a thunderstorm raged. Tango pinched a sprig of honeysuckle between his teeth, letting the nectar pool on his tongue as a few thoughts spun around in his head.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there,” Tango said to one of the fluffy white clouds. Jimmy was off, paying his respects and burying Martyn, and Tango felt it was only proper that he do something similar. He didn’t have a body to bury, but he hoped Skizz would forgive him for that.

“I think you’d be mighty cross with me for apologizing, probably, but we both know I’ve got to say it. I’m sorry you got caught up with me.” Tango curled in on himself, clutching at his knees. The nectar from the honeysuckle sprig dripped across his knuckles. “There’s only one thing in the world I’d trade knowing you for, and that’s knowing you’re alive out there, somewhere.” Tango exhaled, breath hot, and blinked fast, wishing the thunderstorm could cross the river and give him an excuse for why his face was wet. “Enough sad stuff, you hated sad stuff.” Tango swiped at his face and coughed to try and steady his voice.

He could hear the cows on the farm nearby, mooing at each other from where they were all laying down, waiting for the storm to reach them. Tango bet that they were all more than a bit confusified about why it wasn’t coming their way.

“You’d love Jimmy,” Tango said, because if he was still talking to Skizz, then he was going to *talk* to him. “We’re heading out before too long. I still—I still can’t believe that he’s coming with me, honestly. I’ve told him about all the other people I’ve run with—you and Imp and Zed and everybody. Hell, he *met* Etho! Eh,” he amended, “sort of met him—but he’s still letting me tag along. It’s... his positivity would have given you a run for your money, man.”

Tango trailed off again, watching the water churn in the riverbed. A bird landed nearby, hopping around the bank for a moment, trying to find fish. He wasn’t sure what type it was. Something white, with a big, curved beak and beady little eyes. It startled, fluttering up into the air, when Tango asked, too loud,

“Am I doing this right?” The bird squawked at him in answer. Helpful. “I think my experiences are a little skewed, but I don’t know if I’m doing this right.” Tango sighed, “We got Ren, and Martyn. And Joel told me—he told me you stayed on purpose, so that Ren

wouldn't try and shoot us on sight, thinking we'd helped you escape." Tango took a steadying breath, feeling the dew from the grass leech into his jeans. "We never deserved you, buddy. But it was a pleasure and an honor knowing you. If I can try to be half as decent a man as you are—*were*—I'll have a damn good life ahead of me."

Tango blinked, as fast as he could to keep the tears from falling. He was out of words, now, but it was the first time he'd gotten a chance to say goodbye to Skizz. For a moment, remembering Skizz holding onto him as he nearly shook apart, saying his goodbyes to Impulse and Zedaph, remembering that encouragement, Skizz's insistence that it would help him heal, Tango thought he could feel Skizz's arm around him again.

He tossed another look skyward—he would believe Skizz was in Hell the same day he got dragged back down there himself—and saluted with the little sprig of honeysuckle.

Then he stood, letting the flower fall to the grass, and turned his feet back to the town. If he played his cards right, he was pretty sure he could get a game out of Joel and Sausage before Sausage had to be a proper barman and start in on the dinner rush.

~

"*Thank* you, Mumbo!" Pearl beamed, settling the bundle of letters onto the bag at her hip. "You are a shining beacon of postal efficiency!" she was standing inside the mess of the vault, having picked her way through piles of letters to grab the ones Mumbo said were ready for delivery. Grian had been exiled, thanks to continually distracting both of them with utter nonsense, and had since commandeered Mumbo's desk to label all of the letters being returned to sender. Grian waited until she was looking so she'd see him roll his eyes at her effusive praise of their friend.

"Oh, ah, you're quite welcome, Pearl," Mumbo said, his cheeks going a bit pink even as he grinned at Grian's reaction.

Pearl settled the old postman's bag firmly on her shoulder, making a mental note to stop by and show Scott the finished product in action, since he'd been the one who had helped her patch it up when he'd started speaking to her again.

It wasn't like it was *her* fault that the trousers she'd borrowed had been ruined. The structural integrity of her clothing had been the last thing on her mind while actively trying to keep her brothers from being killed at the hand of eldritch monstrosities.

It wasn't like she could just up and *say* that, though. Especially since he'd been having to make do with the dress she'd been wearing. *That* she felt a bit sorry for. She hadn't been thinking very clearly after everything, and she was quite sure there were still a few bloodstains on her sleeves. Not exactly something she would want to be seen in under ordinary circumstances, let alone lend out to a friend.

So, she had apologized, ordered him a new bolt of fabric on the sly, and had been rewarded with an eye roll and an "oh, go on," when she'd seen him next, marking her as having been thoroughly forgiven.

Del Sombra had rattled and shook and then rolled right along as if nothing had changed. She still helped Gem build her lesson plans, still snuck Hermès treats and bickered with Jimmy, but...

It *had* changed.

It felt like the whole world had opened up for her. The world was her oyster, shell cracked wide open, and all she had to do was take it in both hands.

She emerged from the bank into the warmer air outside and couldn't hold back a smile as the sun hit her face.

She practically danced over to the general store, where her first delivery awaited. Cleo raised an eyebrow at her getup as she walked in, but the faint smile on her face was proof enough for Pearl that she was meant to be here, in this bizarre little town of theirs.

"Someone's cheery today," Cleo said as she finished unpacking a crate onto one of the shelves behind her. "Get some good news?"

"Nope!" Pearl chirped, "But I *am* here on officially official business."

Cleo chuckled at her tone but turned back to give Pearl her full attention. She noticed Pearl's newest accessory, possibly because Pearl had swung it around to hold in front of herself as she rummaged inside for the bundle Grian had marked as Cleo's. "Aha," she said, understanding dawning in her tone, "*officially* official. I take it Scar's made you a permanent fixture, then?"

"It's a little unorthodox," Pearl allowed, "but admit it, I'm perfect for the job!" To help prove her point, she brandished the stack of envelopes, dated as far back as two years ago, thanks to all of the hullabaloo, and grinned. "Ta-da!"

Cleo's eyebrows raised at the sheer number of envelopes in her packet. She took them gingerly, looking a bit lost. She shuffled through them, clearly checking to make sure they were all hers.

"Ah—" she said after a moment's silence. "Thank you, Pearl! Sorry, sorry. Did you need anything else?"

"Nope!" Pearl said, frankly just glad that all of the envelopes had been correctly addressed. She'd been a little worried about that, given how sleep deprived she knew Grian and Mumbo could get. She felt a little of the weight drop off her shoulders. "Just the satisfaction of a job well done!" and before Cleo could find some mistake she'd accidentally made, she added, "bye, Cleo! See you around!"

"Bye, Pearl," Cleo called back, sounding very amused. As she left, Pearl noticed Cleo reach to the side for her shears so she could cut the twine and start opening her letters.

Even outside, though, she could hear the exasperated, "Wh—Two years? Oh, God help me, *Scar!*" that Pearl thought she'd be getting a lot while making these deliveries.

“Pearl!” called a familiar voice as she crossed the road toward her next stop. Speak of the devil, she thought. She jogged over to him as he waved her down. “The lady of the hour! Just who I wanted to see.”

Pearl eyed him a little more warily.

“Hullo Scar,” she said, letting that wariness drip into her voice. “What’s got you thinking you need to butter me up?”

“Nothing, nothing! Just wanted to see how you were doing. How are your deliveries going?”

“Cleo’s going to hunt you down, I think.” Pearl said, candidly. Scar winced. “Knives may or may not be included,” she added, just because she knew he’d go a little pale.

“I probably deserve that one. Poor Mayor Hills thought he’d been sending letters to a dead woman.”

“Scar!” Pearl said, horrified.

“The mail was not exactly my first priority!” Scar protested. “Anyway, anyway, that’s not why I called you over here.”

“I knew it,” she groaned, her trepidation returning in full force.

“No, no, it’s nothing bad.” Scar said, aiming for reassuring. “I had to leave my horse behind in Lonesome Hill. As Del Sombra’s resident Postmaster General, I was wondering if you’d be willing to go and fetch her and drop a line to Mayor Hollows while you were there.”

Pearl blinked, surprised. Part of the surprise came from knowing that a few months ago, Scar would have been reluctant to let any of them out of his sight, because if one of them left, *all* of them left. This was a level of trust—not just in her, but in *Grian*—that she wasn’t sure they deserved. Scar’s eyes didn’t lose their twinkle as she floundered, though his smile went a little smaller, a little more personal.

“What about the mail?” she asked. Her fingers shook a little at the prospect, pulling something nameless and huge up from into her chest. It choked her even as it warmed her, and she wondered if it was fear, or if it was hope.

It hadn’t sunk in, until now, that they were free. There was no one left to chase her. There were no madmen lurking in the night waiting to slit her throat. Or, at least, the chances for that were about the same for her as everybody else.

Scar waved a hand, dismissive, “They’ve waited for two years—”

“*Scar!*” Pearl cried, disapproving. Scar flushed, raising his hands in surrender.

“Which is *why*,” he continued, like this was the end of his sentence the whole time, “I’ll deliver it myself. Or I’ll get *Grian* to do it. Deal?”

He held his hand out between them, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

Pearl eyed his hand. She raised an eyebrow at him and waited. His smile faltered a little, and if she wasn't mistaken, that was a bead of sweat rolling down his face.

"This a *deal* deal?" she asked, quiet enough that she knew no one on the street would catch the emphasis.

"Could be, if you wanted." Scar shrugged, "But this was more of a loosey-goosey 'I need a favor, I miss my horse, and I trust Pearl' sort of decision."

He smiled beatifically at her, batting his eyelashes innocently.

"How do you convince people to do what you say?" she asked, amused, "Really, it's like I can see right through you."

Scar's mouth turned up a little more at one corner. His eyes flashed with nameless amusement. He wagged his fingers in the open air between them. She rolled her eyes.

"Oh, all right," she conceded, taking his hand and shaking it once, sharply. She waved for Scar to follow as she started walking back to the bank, figuring that if it was his idea, he could be the one to tell Grian, "but," she added, a thought occurring to her, "I'm taking Gem with me, if she'll go."

Scar groaned, "Oh, the kids'll *love* that," he grumbled, but the smile hadn't left his face. "Just you watch, Hermès will be running this town by the time you get back."

Pearl perked up as they ducked into the bank and she saw Lizzie standing in front of Grian's desk, her arms folded and a displeased expression on her face.

"If you can find me a preacher that will *willingly* come here," Grian said as they approached, "I will rebuild the church *by hand*."

"You just don't like him," Lizzie accused. Grian scoffed.

"Liz, I threatened to have you kidnapped to try and dissuade you from marrying," Grian's voice dripped with derision, "*Algernon Blackwood*. He was a crotchety old lech and the only reason you married him was because you thought you'd run out of time to find another prospect before Pearl's season. You were *wrong*, of course, not that I would ever hold over your head the number of heartbroken missives I received when you announced your engagement—"

Lizzie groaned. Pearl felt as though her heart wasn't going to fit in her chest. It was all so... normal. The familiar steps of the old argument seemed to be returning to Lizzie and Grian as naturally as breathing.

"You could be in love with a tree, and I would think that was a step up." Grian continued when Lizzie ran out of breath.

"I didn't want to debut, anyway," Pearl put in, announcing their presence. Lizzie's face softened when she saw Pearl. "I'm Postmaster General, now. Quite the step up, if you ask me."

“Speaking of,” Scar added, “I’ve got a bit of a job for her so congratulations, Grian! You’ve been promoted to Mailman.”

“Scar, I don’t want to be a mailman. I was doing this to keep myself from going—”

“Great! Glad we’re all on the same page.” Scar said, breezily.

Lizzie hid a smile behind her hand. Pearl didn’t bother.

Scar’s hand on Grian’s shoulder as he passed was more than enough to soothe any ruffled feathers. Pearl saw, from where she stood, the way his annoyed expression melted into a wobbly smile. “Now, let’s see,” he added, heading into the vault, “what sort of progress my favorite Postmaster has made.”

~

Scar was sitting in the sheriff’s office when a man walked into town. He felt Del Sombra, newly introduced to him, perk up in interest.

No, not interest. Trepidation.

Scar was on his feet in an instant, ignoring the twinge his still-irritated leg gave as he did so. He nearly ran into Grian, stumbling madly through the doorway, a wild look in his eyes.

“Company?” Scar asked placidly. Grian worked his jaw for a moment, and Scar thought it must have been sheer force of will that when he spoke, it was only his voice that emerged.

“*Trouble*,” Grian corrected, and turned to lead the way.

Scar didn’t need him to.

The moment that he stepped through the door, he saw *exactly* what the trouble was.

Tango was standing in the middle of the road, blocking the path of the newcomer. He had a confused Jimmy half hidden behind him, but even from a hundred paces, Scar could see that his eyes were wide with terror.

Scar took in the sight of a wide brimmed hat and silver spurs and threw caution to the wind.

He didn’t run, but to any other man, it may well have looked like it. Behind him, Grian swore and worked to catch up. They reached Tango and Jimmy the moment that the man reached out, ignoring Tango’s flinch, and caught Tango by the chin.

Jimmy’s knuckles were white were they gripped Tango’s shoulder, but Tango wasn’t running. Whether that was fear or foolishness, Scar couldn’t tell.

“Well, aren’t you a sight for road-weary eyes?” Scar said, glad that his voice didn’t tremble, and that his breathing wasn’t ragged.

Nick turned to him, dropping his grip on Tango's chin. He looked from Scar to Grian and back again, his eyes cool and dismissive as they flicked between the pair. Scar heard the scrape of boots on the dirt, presumably, as Jimmy dragged Tango as far clear of Nick as he possibly could.

"And *you* are back to your usual self," Nick said, at length.

"The road does weigh on a man," Scar said, agreeing without agreeing. "Now, to what does Del Sombra owe the pleasure of your company?"

Scar tried not to visibly sweat as Nick surveyed him. It helped, just a little, that he could feel Grian on his left, unwavering.

Instead of answering, Nick gestured in Tango and Jimmy's direction. His eyes didn't leave Scar's, he made sure of it. If there was ever something that the man wouldn't back down from, it was a challenge. "Is *that*," he said slowly, a raised eyebrow the only indication of emotion on his face, "your doing?"

Now, Scar was a great many things. He was an ex-conman, he was a sheriff, he was currently in no small amount of discomfort as the impact of rushing halfway across town caught up to his bad leg. He was not, however, *stupid*.

He let a smile take over his face, leisurely and candid.

"Could be," he said, leaning on his cane. He'd found a way to do it that *looked* like showmanship but took all the weight off his leg when he needed to. It had the added benefit of drawing Nick's eye to the cane. Scar watched irritation flash across his face. "I am a man of many talents."

Nick, to Scar's delight, breathed heavily out through his nose, an exasperated noise.

"I don't recall granting you the ability to purify souls," Nick said pointedly. "Nor do I recall where it states that souls within your domain become human, even if they didn't *enter* that way."

Scar felt a bead of sweat run down his back. It could be a coincidence, he thought. He sure didn't believe it.

Nick took a lazy step towards him. Beside Scar, Grian stiffened.

"But *then again*," Nick said, reaching into the pocket of his coat, "imagine my surprise when I looked over our latest contract."

Scar's thumb twinged where he'd pricked it to smear his blood on the bottom of both copies.

"Well now," he said, thinking fast, "don't get me wrong, here, but you were there when I wrote it out. If you had any problems, they ought to have come up at the time."

He wondered, if he asked quickly enough, if Grian would kill him.

Nick scoffed at his words, waving his hand as if brushing them away like smoke in the air.

“‘The man,’” Nick said, and Scar knew what was coming from those two words alone. He didn’t wince, but he did grip the head of his cane just a little more tightly. “‘Currently known as Ryan ‘Scar’ Goodfellow, formerly known by the names Thomas ‘Tom’ Lynn, David Outis, Reynard Woodsly,’” Nick leveled him with a dry look, as he added, “‘*et. al*, in exchange for the terms agreed upon in the above considerations, hereby puts forth as collateral one soul, described by both parties as the ‘right’ soul. In this context, the counterparty—’ being *myself*,” Nick grumbled, “‘has determined the assignation of said soul to be that belonging to Ryan Goodfellow, alias Thomas Lynn, alias David Outis, *et. cetera*.’”

Scar’s smile felt stiff on his face. He knew, of course, where Nick was going with this. To be quite honest, he had been a bit surprised that this hadn’t come back to bite him before. He figured he’d gotten lucky.

It sounded like his luck was about to run out.

“Surely you recognize that portion of our contract, as do I. Now do imagine my surprise,” Nick continued, beginning to pace a tight circle around Scar and Grian. Scar didn’t turn to look at him, he knew better, but Grian did. Grian was watching Nick with an intensity that Scar had rarely seen on his face. His right hand kept twitching, as if wanting nothing more than to go for that sword of his. “When I took a brief look over our contracts recently and noticed what the fine folks in Washington might call *‘fine print’*.”

“Well,” Scar said slowly, “I’m sure I showed you the contract once it was drafted. And thanks to your *proclivities*, we both know that there’s no time between the agreement of the final draft and the signing. There’s just no time for a man to sneak in anything extra.”

“That dog don’t *hunt*, Goodfellow,” Nick snapped. His voice dropped a little of the formality, sliding into something that reminded Scar of the brutality of sweltering southern summers, and the sorts of men who would only think of money when their prize bulls gored a rider. The sun had never felt hotter in Del Sombra than it did just now. Nick went on, barely giving the accusation space to breathe, “the terms of the contract that we have signed have designated that my hold over your soul exist only within the bounds of your lifetime. Upon your death, your soul reverts in ownership to *you* and you alone.”

Nick came to a halt in front of Scar again. He added, with a tone that Scar could only describe as begrudging respect, “Well done, you.”

Scar had a moment of fluttering relief before he took in the sight of Nick’s teeth, bared in a smile of his own.

“*However*,” Nick continued, “we are well within the bounds of your lifetime. Since it is thanks to *you* and a select few of the lovely residents of your domain that I find myself lacking a Rider,” his eyes darted over to where Tango and Jimmy had fled, “I think it only fair that I exercise my rightful hold over your soul.”

“I’m afraid you’re looking at the wrong man for the job,” Scar said quickly, “I’d make a terrible rider. I’m not exactly good at that whole ‘tracking’ malarkey, see. It was sheer luck

that led me to—”

Nick, in a move that horrified Scar as much as it fascinated him, tossed back his head and laughed.

The sound rang across the street, bouncing off of the walls of shops, and stopping the people around them in their tracks. It was a lovely sound, something fit to make angels weep.

Scar felt a twinge of fear take root in the marrow of his bones.

“Bless your heart,” Nick said, his voice sickly sweet. “I don’t need *you* to be my Rider. I have a more important job in mind for you. Something, I think you’ll agree, that is the very culmination of everything you’ve been striving towards with these deals of yours.”

“And what might that be?” Scar asked, all pretense and pomp gone from his voice.

“I can find the souls on my own,” Nick clarified, “tedious though it may be, it’s no hardship. But until such a time as I can find a *new* rider, *someone* is going to need to watch over my Domain during my infrequent absences.”

“What are you saying?” Grian asked, because apparently living in fear for three years had given him a taste for a death wish. If Scar cared about him even a mite less, he’d level the man with a horrified look. As it was, he kept his eyes on Nick and his posture steady.

“I am *saying*,” Nick acknowledged Grian’s presence with the same gravitas one might acknowledge a mayfly, or a cowpie that one had stepped in, which was to say, none at all, “that I do hope your test run with Del Sombra has given you a good sense of comportment when placed in positions of leadership. In my absences, and in a *very* limited capacity, you will be in charge of ensuring that *my* Domain is running properly.”

“Well,” Scar said, searching his mind for a way to fast talk his way out of it, but he was coming up empty. “That’s—You want me to *run* Hell?”

“As I said, in a *very* limited capacity. I would wish you luck,” he added with a sneer, while Scar was still processing, “but I don’t think I hold much stock in your sort of luck.”

That tone snapped Scar out of it. He settled his shoulders, reaching out to place a hand on Grian’s back. He hoped it would serve both as a source of comfort and as a deterrent, keeping Grian from doing something monumentally stupid.

“My sort of luck,” he said with the conviction that only came from stalwart belief, “is the only kind there is.”

“And what sort is that?” Nick asked, amused.

Scar thought of Grian, trusting him to keep his family safe. He thought of winning a set of tarot cards that led him exactly where he needed to be. He thought of a pen, tucked in a secret pocket in the lining of his coat, identical in every way to another pen he had, save that it wrote in invisible ink.

“It’s the sort you make.” Scar told the Devil, with a smile.

~

The last night that Jimmy spent in Del Sombra was the longest night of his life. Despite the steady breathing of Tango in bed beside him, and the low hum of Del Sombra in the back of his mind, stealing lullabies from Grian’s memory that Jimmy had nearly forgotten, he couldn’t fall asleep.

He watched the moon through the window, climbing steadily up and out of sight.

“I really loved being your sheriff,” he whispered once, quiet enough that his breath didn’t even stir the hairs on the back of Tango’s neck. “Take care of them for me, would you?”

Outside, the wind seemed to echo Del Sombra’s melody of choice. Jimmy figured that was answer enough, and let her song soothe him to sleep one more time.

When he woke, it was to the sound of voices beyond the door. Tango grunted and pulled his pillow over his ear.

“Timmy!” Grian called, his voice too rambunctious for the early hour. Jimmy had a sneaking suspicion, gleaned from the way that Grian’s voice wobbled at the edges, that he was covering up a bout of sentimentality. “Liz’s train leaves on the hour. Get down here, would you?”

Jimmy rubbed the sleep from his eyes and nudged Tango. A deep red eye, barely open, greeted him when Tango moved the pillow. Tango glared at him halfheartedly, but after a moment, smiled back at him.

“Ready?” Jimmy asked him.

“Ngh,” came the eloquent reply. “Five more minutes.”

Jimmy chuckled, but left him be, clambering out of bed the easiest way he’d figured out how to. When they finally settled down, they’d need to keep the bed away from both walls.

He started his morning routine and felt something warm settle into place in his chest when, a few minutes later, Tango came up behind him and wrapped his arms around Jimmy’s waist, still sleep-warm and comfortable.

“Sleep well?” Tango asked, as though he already knew the answer.

“Hm,” Jimmy said, not sure how to explain staying up half the night and still somehow waking rested.

He was going to miss this town. He swallowed around a lump in his throat and turned to smile at Tango.

Lucky for Jimmy, Tango seemed to be feeling something similar. The hook in his smile was a little crooked, a little bittersweet.

Picking up his bag, this time, didn't fill Jimmy with irritation, or grief, or white-hot rage the way it sometimes had while they were running. Tango slung his over his shoulder as well, and the pair of them trudged downstairs.

The rest of their assemblage was already gathered there. Grian and Pearl were bickering and had dragged a bleary-eyed Joel into the fray. Lizzie had a folio tucked under one arm, wearing black for the first time since arriving in Del Sombra. Then again, Jimmy realized, she was *technically* still in mourning.

The London society was going to have a *field* day when she showed back up with Joel on her arm.

Scar was waiting beside Beef, both hands folded on his cane, the splitting image of the day he'd met them on the train platform. Jimmy pinched his lips together, forcing back a swell of emotion.

He'd said goodbye to the rest of the townfolk last night, when they'd rung up a whole soiree in the Saloon as a way to say goodbye to friends, old and new. He was wearing the new coat that Scott had apparently stayed up late every night for the past week to finish, according to Sausage. The hidden pistol in his left pocket was counterbalanced on the other side with a gift that Scar had tried to slip him on the sly—a bag filled with enough to keep them on the road, get Tango's name out there, until they ended up where they landed and set up shop. Nestled next to it was his deputy's badge. Jimmy had tried giving it back, but Scar had flat-out refused to take it, saying he was keeping a place for Jimmy in Del Sombra in case he ever needed it.

"About time!" Grian crowed when he saw them, expertly diverting the course of whatever argument he'd been losing, "If you dragged your feet any more, there'd be grooves in the floorboards."

"Let's move this party down to the station," Scar said, quick to jump at the lull in conversation, "and give Beef his boarding house back, shall we?"

As the group filed out, Jimmy hung back a little to shake Beef's hand.

"Thank you," he said, pouring every ounce of gratitude and sincerity into the words that he could, "for everything."

Beef, to his surprise, pulled Jimmy into a crushing hug.

"You'd better write to us, sheriff," he said, the words quiet in the sudden silence.

"You know I will." Jimmy replied, not bothering to hide the emotion in his voice. Beef released him and shooed Jimmy out into the burgeoning sunrise.

After that, things felt a bit like he was caught up at the edge of a tornado again. There was a mad scramble of goodbyes, embraces that were just a little too tight to be entirely written off as '*goodbye-for-now*'s. If the last few years had shown them anything, it was that any goodbye could be the last one, so they needed to make them count.

But, before the noonday sun had fully illuminated Del Sombra, Lizzie and Joel were safely ensconced in a train carriage, rushing East, and Jimmy and Tango were on the backs of Arrow and Bullseye, eyes anywhere.

Jimmy slowed at the edge of town, feeling the last vestiges of Del Sombra reaching for him.

He let her hold on for a moment, giving into her version of an embrace.

Once mine, she said in the back of his mind, her voice a fierce echo of Cleo's, *always mine*. The promise was a fierce one, an echo of Scar's own token in Jimmy's pocket. There would always be a place for them in Del Sombra.

"Ready?" asked Tango.

Jimmy took a deep breath and clicked his tongue. Arrow stepped forward, outside of the town limits, and Del Sombra faded from his mind.

Tango smiled at him, that same half-sad smile, but there was more in it than that. "Where to?" he asked, looking at the sky to check the time.

"Anywhere," Jimmy said, "as long as it's with you."

Tango snorted at him, looking back down with a grin.

"Sweet as that may be," he said, though the color on his cheeks belied the wry tone of his voice, "we still need to pick a direction."

Jimmy snickered, "Southwest, then. We can cover some ground and then pick a town when we hit a crossroads."

"Good enough for me," Tango said, nudging Bullseye to face the proper direction.

With excitement fluttering like a small bird in his chest, Jimmy followed.

Chapter End Notes

With my sincerest apologies to Algernon Blackwood for stealing his name for a character in my MCYT fanfiction. XD If nothing else, sir, I hope that you would find it funny.

now with the funny haha joke note out of the way:

Thank you all so much for coming on this journey with me. This is my longest ever fandom/creative endeavor, and the outpouring of love from all of you has been so incredible <3 I genuinely thought that this would be such a niche combination of interests that I'd get maybe a couple of people invested in the storyline, but you have all absolutely blown me out of the water. I'm glad that y'all are just as insane about ranchers

and this fic as I am <3

Thank you to everyone who has read, or commented, or done fanart, or rec'd it - you are all so amazing. I sincerely appreciate every single one of you <3

Once more, with feeling:

Biggest thanks to the mods of the Hermitshipping Big Bang 2023 event. There are so many fabulous fics and artworks that came out of this event. [Go check 'em out!](#)

A huge round of applause to my artists!

[Hybbart](#) &

[Foxyola!](#)

Cthulhu fhtagn <3

God Has Cursed Me For My Hubris, And My Work is Never Finished

Chapter Summary

Do it for the bit, they said, it'll be fun they said!

/j

They forgot to mention the war flashbacks that would come of doing 5 pages worth of Chicago Style citations. These aren't even *all* of them, I've got books hidden somewhere that I'll need to add later.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Dux and Pancho of the HSBB discord for ~~enabling~~ encouraging this unhinged behavior and sparking the idea for the citation page.

Thanks also to Hbomberguy, who did an extended critique on YouTube's lack of citations for being what I listened to directly before Dux suggested this, and therefore already infecting me with the brainworms to do five pages worth of Chicago Style Citations.

Art Links!

[Foxy's Big Bang Piece](#)

[Hybbart's Big Bang piece!](#)

Go show them some love over on tumblr!!

Leafdoodles also posted [a sketch page that I absolutely adore!](#)

Thank you all for the love you've given this fic! This has been so much fun <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Enjoy! XD

Various un-alphabetized Citations:

Thank you to my partner [Jim](#) for various horse knowledge.

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Chapter End Notes

And with that, we are officially done! It took a little extra time to get these citations done, and they're not properly alphabetized, but here's a glimpse into the chaos that writing *Dirges* was, research-wise!

For those who are curious, I ran a little poll over on my [tumblr](#) about what fic in the series people might want next, and it was decided that the Jimmy and Tango follow up would be first!! (I don't know what I expected.png /silly). I've got an outline nearly finished, so if you guys have preferences of whether I post chapter by chapter as I finish them, or if you want it to be completed the way *Dirges* (mostly) was and posted weekly after that point, let me know! Either way, you can always check my tumblr for updates!

End Notes

This fic is already completed and will be updated weekly!
Come say hello over on [tumblr!](#)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!